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BUFFALO BILL'S FACE GREW AS STERN AS DEATH AS HE READ THE PLACARD ON
THE DEAD STAGE-DRIVER'S BREAST.

OR,

The Masked Driver of Death's Canyon.

The Romance of the Fatal Run on the
Overland Trail.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.
THE FATAL TRAIL.

"A HUNDRED dollars a round trip to the driver who has got the nerve to drive the coach through on the run through the Fatal Trail!"

The loud voice of the speaker was heard by several hundred men, and a wild, reckless-looking lot they were, too, yet not one answered, not a word was heard, and a deathlike silence fell upon all.

The scene was an Overland stage station, in the far Wild West, and the place was a half-

mining, half-cowboy camp, and the resort of some of the ugliest spirits in Borderland.

It was a junction of stage-trails, no less than four centering there, and hence it was a very important post, with half a hundred employees of the coach line gathered there to work in the stables, and a dozen of the crack drivers of Borderland.

But the words of the Overland boss brought forth no response in spite of his liberal offer, and so he said:

"Remember, pards, a hundred dollars is not picked up every day for just two days' work, so who calls me to accept it?"

Still no response.

"I'll make it a couple of hundred, men, for the run, so who calls me now?"

Still a silence that could be felt was the only response.

"Say, men, are you all so badly scared because there have been a few men shot from the box on the Fatal Trail, that you won't risk the drive when I say it's two hundred dollars clean cash on the run?"

Still no answer, though the crowd moved uneasily and men looked each other in the face to see who would dare the run.

"See here, pards, the Fatal Trail I admit is well named Death's Canyon, for I counted myself thirty-three graves there in the valley, and I don't deny that just one clean dozen of them are drivers of the Overland, killed on duty, without a word of warning.

"But the coach must go through from here, pards, to Fort Rest, and so on through Death's Canyon to Fort Famine, and back again, down one day and back another, and I say again it's two hundred for the run to the man who dares take it through.

"Who talks?"

Nobody did, and the silence was unbroken until a voice called out:

"Here comes Buffalo Bill!"

A shout, a half cheer, arose at the cry and all eyes were turned upon a horseman who came riding toward the group at a canter.

A more splendid specimen of manhood one would not care to behold than was that horseman, William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill the King of the Wild West, and who has well earned, besides, the other names of the Prince of the Plains, the Chief of Bordermen, the Buckskin Wizard and Deadly Eye the Slayer, for his life has been one long scene of daring adventure, desperate danger and good work on the plains and in the mountains of the Land of the Setting Sun.

He was superbly mounted upon a large, wiry roan stallion, his equipments were of the best, and he was dressed in buckskin leggings, top boots, an embroidered woolen shirt and wide-brimmed sombrero of a dove color, one side of which was looped up by a gold buffalo with diamond eyes, and a brand upon his side in rubies of the word "Bill."

Around his sombrero was a gold cord, representing a lasso, and upon his shoulders were straps in which was a device like the pin, signifying his name and the gold-embroidered words:

"CHIEF OF SCOUTS' LEAGUE."

He raised his hat politely in recognition of the welcome he received and glancing over the crowd nodded at familiar faces that he caught sight of, while he asked in his cheery way:

"What is the picnic, pards, for if there is any fun in it I would like to chip in?"

"There is no fun in it, Buffalo Bill, but sartin death, for the Overland Boss here called the crowd together to git a volunteer ter drive the coach through on the Fatal Trail, through Death's Canyon, in truth, and though he offers big bait he hasn't got a nibble yet," cried a man in the crowd in response to the chief of scouts' question.

CHAPTER II.

THE VOLUNTEERS.

BUFFALO BILL had listened most attentively to the explanation offered, every eye upon his face, which was immovable, showing no sign of what his thoughts might be.

He looked toward Pete Porter, the Overland Boss, and asked:

"Will none of the drivers take the coach out, Pete?"

"Not one, Buffalo Bill, and can you blame them, being as how they are almost sure of death?"

"Well, Pete Porter, my creed is that where duty calls we must obey, if certain death stares us in the face.

"It would not do for a soldier, or a scout to refuse to go into battle or on a trail, just because he feared he would be killed."

"That's so, Bill," answered Pete Porter, while there was a murmur of approbation from the crowd as the chief of scouts expressed his views.

Then Buffalo Bill continued:

"Now I know the drivers of the Overland as the bravest of brave men, and their duties are perilous and severe in the extreme.

"It is true that they have no chance to defend their lives, but are in constant dread of a

deadly shot from ambush; but I guess I can pick out several in that crowd that won't sink if you call on them to take the stage through."

As the scout spoke he glanced over the group of drivers, who had huddled together, perhaps under the feeling that misery loves company.

There were several who met his eyes, but most of them did not, and Pete Porter said:

"Well, Bill, the man who volunteers gets two hundred and fifty dollars for the round run, so if you can pick out who will go, do so."

"Why, of course I can."

"Step out Chispa Charlie, my old pard."

At the word of the scout a man stepped out of the group of drivers and advanced toward Buffalo Bill, with the remark:

"Here I am, Pard Bill, to take the old hearse to my grave."

A wild yell of admiration burst from the crowd at this bold act and then a voice called out:

"You makes Number Thirteen, Chispa Charlie, and its a bad-luck number."

A silence followed these words which Chispa Charlie broke with:

"I am ready for the run when Boss Pete gives the word."

Another cheer greeted his fearless words, and Buffalo Bill said, as he glanced over the group of drivers.

"And you, Ben Bolt, will take the coach if Chispa Charlie goes under."

"I'm yer man, Bill, if you says so," and Ben Bolt, a tall, gaunt specimen of manhood, stepped to the side of Chispa Charlie.

He too was greeted with a cheer, and the scout then said, while the crowd of drivers began to move uneasily and look anxious:

"And there is Harkaway Harry, Pete Porter, who will take the reins if Chispa Charlie and Ben Bolt go under."

In perfect silence did Harkaway Harry step to the side of the other two volunteers.

He was a handsome fellow, with bronzed face and not over thirty years of age, but a splendid driver and one who had made a record.

He too received a burst of applause that was deafening, and Buffalo Bill, still looking over the drivers said:

"And Bony will go if Harkaway Harry is killed."

"I'm blessed if I do," was the emphatic reply of the driver, and a roar of laughter followed, while he continued:

"If yer hed called on me first, Bill Cody, I'd hev been yer man; but with Chispa Charlie, Ben Bolt and Harkaway Harry driving ther hearse to their own funeral, I'm going ter call it off, for I don't go."

"And you, Brighton?"

"I'm no coward, Buffalo Bill, but I won't drive if those three boys goes under, following to the grave the brave fellows who has already passed in their chips."

"Well, Brackett, what do you say?" asked Cody, glancing at another of the drivers.

"Any other run for me but ther Fatal Trail, Buffalo Bill," was the decided answer.

"And, Hawkins, how is it with you?"

"I don't drive through Death's Canyon."

"And Mabry?"

"I hain't drivin' my own hearse, Bill Cody."

"Dave Proctor, you'll go if the others fall?"

"I'll not go, and they is fools ter play ag'in' a game which is dead sartin ter win."

"Well, Pete, you have three brave fellows to tie to, and if they go under, send me word and I'll get you a man who will drive the Fatal Trail, so call upon me," and Buffalo Bill rode on his way.

CHAPTER III.

THE SCOUT'S REPORT.

FORT REST had gotten its name from the fact that the small army, pushed rapidly to the wilderness to fight back red-skins, had there come to a halt and built a stockade post, which had afterward been strengthened into a permanent outpost and made a fort.

It was well located for defense, and held a position from which offensive operations could readily be made.

It was distant from Trail End City, the place where the Overland trails had centered and had a terminus, some fifty miles, and it had been found necessary to place another outpost sixty miles further away from Fort Rest, as an advanced guard.

Winter had caught the post without sufficient provisions, and unable to get supplies a number of men had starved to death.

With the coming of spring the post had also been strongly fortified and was known as Fort Famine.

It was between these two forts, Rest and Famine, at an equal distance from each, that the trail ran through the Death's Canyon.

A battle between Indians, the Sioux and Pawnees, had been fought here and strewed the canyon with human bones.

Then a fight between United States Cavalry and red-skins had been fought in the canyon several years after, and the result was that many new graves dotted the scene.

The relief going to the aid of Fort Famine, with supplies, had been attacked there by red-

skins and massacred, and this added but another horror to Death's Canyon.

As there was a rich mining country beyond Fort Famine, the Overland Stage Company had found it expedient to run a coach through each week, and back to Trail End City.

But the horrors of Death's Canyon were added to, as there was a stage-load of passengers, with the driver, slain and robbed there.

Deaths in the coaches, and of the drivers followed frequently, until the canyon became known as the Fatal Trail.

Both Indians and road-agents were said to be the murderers and robbers, but about this opinions differed.

It was thought to establish a picket there, but no water or grass could be found within ten miles upon either side, and nothing but a very large force would have dared remain, as the red-skins could sweep down from the mountains in numbers and annihilate them.

Colonel Miles, commanding the outpost line, had all that he could attend to with the soldiers under his command at the two forts and the country adjacent, so that the Overland coach had to take their chances, protected as best they could be by a squad of cavalry, or several scouts.

Such was the situation at the time when Buffalo Bill got the three volunteer drivers to decide to take a coach through, two weeks having elapsed since the run had been made.

Upon his return from Trail End City to Fort Rest, Buffalo Bill went at once to headquarters to report to Colonel Miles.

That gallant officer received him cordially and quickly asked:

"Back so soon, Cody?"

"Yes, colonel, I was not detained long."

"Well, what luck?"

"The coach goes through to-morrow, sir."

"Good!"

"And what fellow drives it?"

"Chispa Charlie, sir."

"I wish I could give him an escort, but I dare not, for we cannot afford to lose any of our soldiers now; but I fear he will be killed."

"I feel almost certain of it, sir; but he is a driver, and duty calls him to sacrifice himself."

"True; but if he falls, no other man will dare go."

"Yes, sir, Ben Bolt has volunteered to take the coach if Chispa Charlie falls."

"He, too, has nerve, and it will be a pity to see him go under, and if he does, then that ends trying to keep the Overland coaches running until my force is stronger."

"No, sir, for Harkaway Harry will go if Ben Bolt goes under."

"Ah! he, too, is a plucky one."

"He is the man, is he not, who so well imitates a bugle call?"

"Yes, sir, and so gained the name of Harkaway Harry."

"You surely got no others to volunteer?"

"Not another man would do so, sir."

"Then, if those three men fall, I shall order Peter to stop the attempt to run the coaches."

"There is one more chance, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Who is he?"

"That, sir, I cannot now tell you, but if those three men fall, I have a man who will take the coach through."

"If he fails also, then it will be time to stop the coaches."

"I should think so; but I am interested in knowing who this plucky fellow can be, Cody."

"You shall know in good time, colonel, so pardon me for refusing to tell you now."

"Certainly, Cody, and if he is your choice, I have faith in him," was the colonel's reply.

CHAPTER IV.

CHISPA CHARLIE'S RUN.

THE coaches from the three trails leading into Trail End City came in to that halting-place one by one.

The one from the east arrived at sunset, giving the passengers a night's rest at Pete Porter's hotel, "The Wayside."

The coach from the north came in at midnight, and the one from southward at dawn.

At sunrise the coach going west was to start, the one through Fort Rest, through the Fatal Trail, and thence on to Fort Famine, and Chispa Charlie was to take it out.

There were at Trail End City three passengers waiting to go on to the Sunset Mines beyond, and in the vicinity of, Fort Famine, and upon the three coaches coming in were five other passengers.

Two of these were for Fort Rest, the other three for Fort Famine, and one of the latter was a young girl of sixteen, the daughter of an officer at the fort, another being the wife of a sergeant, the third a soldier, a young man and new recruit.

So Chispa Charlie had eight passengers to go through with him, and the young girl had spoken for the box seat.

Every eye was upon Chispa Charlie as he came out of The Wayside after breakfast and lighted his cigar.

His face was unruffled, though perhaps a trifle pale, and yet his look was one in which there was not an atom of fear.

The young girl, a perfect beauty and bright as a lark, must also have known of the full danger of the road, yet did not show that she held any dread of it.

There were others of the passengers who looked uneasy however, and the two whose journey was to end at Fort Rest had a satisfied expression upon their faces.

Every eye was upon Chispa Charlie, and the drivers, his pards of the reins, came forward and grasped his hand as though in a last farewell.

Then he mounted to his box, there was a roaring cheer for his pluck, for all of Trail End City had gathered there to see him take his departure, and the Overland Boss gave the word:

"Time's up, Chispa Charlie, and Heaven protect you."

"Go!"

A crack of the whip and the team of six horses bounded away on their run to Fort Rest.

Fifteen miles out there was a relay and fresh horses were hitched up in place of the others, and twenty miles further another team was put in.

Then it was about a fifteen-mile run to Fort Rest.

Chispa Charlie had made good time, had been greatly entertained by the conversation of his fair companion, and including his two halts at the relay corrals, had made the run in eight hours, coming in sight of the fort just at two o'clock.

"See here, miss, I wants you to do me a favor," he said to the young girl.

"Certainly, what is it, sir?" was the ready answer.

"I wants you to stop over at Fort Rest until this trail is safe ter travel, and ter keep ther sergeant's wife with yer."

"Not I."

"Yer see, miss, I knows yer is game, but then there is something awful mysterious about ther killing at Death's Canyon, and there is women in ther graves there as well as men."

"I hain't hurt ter see men face death, but when it comes to a woman, and especially a pretty gal like you, I draws out ther game, so I asks yer ter stay at ther fort, and keep ther sergeant's wife with yer."

"No, Chispa Charlie, I started to rejoin my father, knowing the dangers I had to face, and I shall go on my way with you," was the determined reply of the maiden.

"I'm sorry, miss; but I hopes the colonel won't let yer go."

"My father may be under Colonel Miles's orders, but I am not, and I go through."

"What time will we reach Fort Famine?"

"We are due there at midnight, miss," was the significant reply.

"Well, my ticket reads to Fort Famine, and I go on with the coach."

Chispa Charlie sighed but said no more, and soon after blew the bugle-call to announce the coming of the coach.

"Now let me have your bugle," said the maiden, and she at once began to ring off a most stirring air, to the great delight of Chispa Charlie.

As the bugle-notes died away the coach dashed up to the station in the fort, and the driver was greeted with a cheer, for all knew the chances the brave fellow had taken to go through to Fort Famine.

The horses were quickly replaced by fresh ones, time was allowed for the travelers to get dinner, and, minus the two who were to remain at the fort, the coach rolled on its way, followed by many eyes that felt that they looked for the last time upon at least some of those who were to face the dangers of the Death's Canyon.

CHAPTER V.

A HOT CHASE.

THE coach had been gone an hour, or more, when Colonel Miles came out of his quarters, attended by a group of officers, and in the midst of whom was Buffalo Bill, for a war council had been held, which the chief of scouts had been asked to attend.

"The coach has not come through yet, Cody, so your man Chispa Charlie must have backed down at the last minute," said the colonel.

Before Buffalo Bill could reply an orderly approached with the mail-bag and handed it to the adjutant.

"What, orderly, has the coach arrived?" cried the colonel, for the stage-station was at the other end of the fort, nearly half-a-mile from headquarters.

"Yes, sir, over an hour ago, but I did not wish to disturb you, sir."

"Indeed!"

"Then I retract the remark against Chispa Charlie, Cody."

"Who was the driver, orderly?" quickly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Chispa Charlie, sir, and he was as chipper as could be."

"Orderly, I expected the daughter of Major Ambrose Dean on that coach, on her way to join her father at Fort Famine."

"Was she along?"

"Yes, sir, and she went on with Chispa Charlie and his other five passengers, sir."

Colonel Miles turned pale at hearing this, while he said:

"Great Heavens!"

"Her father asked me to stop her here."

"The coach must have been ahead of time, orderly."

"Half an hour, sir, and did not stop long, for the driver wanted to get through Death's Canyon before night."

"Quick, Captain May, take a squad of your men and ride with all haste after the coach, carrying a led horse along for Miss Hortense Dean to return on, for you must fetch her back with you."

"Tell her that such are my orders, and you, Cody, go as guide for the captain."

"Yes, sir, but suppose she will not come, for she is a woman."

"But she must."

"Still, Colonel Miles, I cannot force her to do so," Captain May remarked.

"Then, if she refuses all your powers of persuasion, command her, and if she still remains obdurate, then escort the coach through to Fort Famine, for I must delay our intended move until your return, that is all," was the answer.

Buffalo Bill had already hastened away, and the captain went quickly to his quarters.

But it was a quarter of an hour before sixteen gallant troopers, under a sergeant, reported at his quarters ready for the ride.

Buffalo Bill, with two of his scouts, awaited them at the stockade gate, and when all was ready, the party started off on the trail of the coach just one hour and forty minutes after its departure.

"A stern chase is a long one, Cody, and the coach is all of twelve miles away, if not more, so set the pace," said Captain May.

With these instructions Buffalo Bill set a rattling pace which he soon saw was too fast for the heavier horses of the troopers, so he slackened it somewhat after several miles had been gone over.

"The Death's Canyon is a trifle nearer Fort Rest, sir, than Fort Famine, just about twenty-eight miles away, and I fear we will hardly reach there before the coach enters it, for Chispa Charlie never spares his horses, and takes no note of schedule time, for he pushes right through," said Cody when a halt was made, ten miles out, at a brook.

"Well, Cody, what have you to suggest?" asked Captain May, who saw that the chief of scouts had something more to say.

"That you allow me and my two men to push on ahead, sir, with all the speed we can."

"You may do so, and I will accompany you, leaving the sergeant to bring on the men," was the reply.

So the captain and the three scouts set off at a more rapid pace than the troopers could keep up, Buffalo Bill urging his horse to a sweeping gallop, which the others also did.

The trail of the horses and coach showed that Chispa Charlie had been driving along at considerable speed, having passed the relay corral twenty miles out from the fort two and a half hours after leaving it.

"He were going fer all ther critters was worth, Bill, and shot off with ther fresh team in ther same style, so will git through ther canyon afore dark, ef ther cattle kin hold out," said the stock-tender at the relay station.

"We must catch him if we kill our horses, captain," was Buffalo Bill's response, and on dashed the party of four at a sweeping gallop once more.

CHAPTER VI.

WRAPPED IN MYSTERY.

THE relay corral, before reaching Death's Canyon, and nearly ten miles away from it, was as strong as a fort, and had three men to guard it and the half-score stage-horses kept there.

About the same distance beyond the canyon was another relay corral, with a like number of guards and horses.

But none of these could ever tell what was the cause of the fatalities in Death's Canyon.

They did not know whether Indians or road-agents did the red deeds that had caused the place to be so feared, and they were never molested themselves, though always upon their guard against a surprise.

On dashed the scouts and Captain May, after leaving Relay Number Three, as it was known, and discussing as they rode along what the stock-tender had told them.

"Chispa Charlie is a plucky fellow, Cody, and so are his passengers, for all must know what they may expect," said Captain May.

"Yes, sir, it requires nerve, and I sincerely hope we can reach the canyon before the coach enters it, for it would be fearful if Miss Dean was slain."

"It would be, indeed," and Captain May urged the party on more rapidly.

They had left the last stream they would cross for miles, and were descending a valley road to the Canyon of Death, which was a risky pass through a mountain range, and over a mile in length.

But, ride as they might they saw that it was impossible to reach the Death's Canyon before sunset at least; but this meant that Chispa Charlie, who must still be half a dozen miles ahead, would have gone through by daylight, and that at least was cheering to contemplate, for ahead of time an hour or more, he might thus elude any enemy who was going there to ambush him, for certainly such murderous foes would not remain longer in the spot than was necessary for their red work.

At the pace they had ridden Cody felt that they would arrive at the canyon nearly half an hour ahead of the troopers, and time might prove most important to Chispa Charlie and his passengers.

So down the valley trail they went at a gallop, increasing their pace as they reached the level road, and still more as they drew near the towering rocks which marked the entrance to the Death's Canyon.

The dark shadows had already thrown the valley in gloom, and as they neared the pass, they beheld only darkness ahead of them, where the light of day was shut out by the towering walls of rock.

Into the canyon they dashed, leaving the light behind them, for all was gloom there, which would increase as the night settled down, for the mountain-tops far away were yet tinged with the last rays of the setting sun.

But Buffalo Bill knew his trail well, and went on at a pace scarcely less rapid than in the valley.

In the center of the canyon, that is half-way through, it widened and there was a space there of half a dozen acres, with a thicket of trees upon either side of the trail and huge boulders of rocks here and there scattered about.

This had been the battle grounds, the scene of the murdered drivers and passengers, and where were the graves of the slain in combat, as well as those shot from ambush.

As they neared this dreaded spot Buffalo Bill drew rein, and after a halt of a minute, all listening attentively and hearing no sound, they moved on once more.

They had neared the other side of the open space when Buffalo Bill's horse gave a startled snort.

"Well, Buckskin, what is it?" and the scout quickly dismounted and on foot went on ahead, the others waiting.

Soon they saw a match lighted and beheld the scout bending over something on the ground.

"We are too late, sir."

"Please come here," he called out and Captain May and the two scouts reached the spot together.

Dismounting they beheld Buffalo Bill lighting a lantern, and when he flashed its rays upon the scene all were appalled at what they beheld.

There was the coach not far away, the tired horses standing with drooping heads.

Upon the box, the reins still grasped in his hands, was Chispa Charlie.

But he was dead.

Lying upon the ground were the bodies of the three miners, and they were dead.

But, search as they might, nowhere could be found the bodies of Hortense Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier.

What had become of them, what their fate had been, was wrapped in mystery.

CHAPTER VII.

TOO LATE.

WHEN the sad sight lighted up by two lanterns now turned upon the scene, fell upon the vision of the four men gathered there in the dark canyon, so truly named Death's Canyon, they stood in silence regarding it, and with uncovered heads out of respect to the dead, for Buffalo Bill had removed his sombrero as he came upon the tragic spectacle, and the others had followed his example.

"My God, Cody! What does it mean?" at last broke from the lips of Captain May.

"It means, sir, that those who have done this deed are determined to kill as well as rob their victims, and to show us they dare do these red deeds in our very faces," was the earnest reply.

"But who has done this red deed?"

"Who has been guilty of the other tragedies enacted here, Captain May?"

"Heaven only knows."

"But can you not discover whether Indians or road-agents are the guilty ones?"

"When the morning comes, perhaps so, sir, as we are so soon upon the scene this time; but not until then."

"Now, what is to be done?"

"I will send one of my scouts back to the fort at once, sir, to report to Colonel Miles, what we have discovered, and the other on to Fort Famine to report the occurrence there."

"That is right; but let us just see if we cannot find some trace of Miss Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier who were reported as passengers upon the coach."

"Had we not best await until morning, sir, so that no other trail will be made save those of the scouts going to the forts, for we can stay in the coach, sir, and your troopers can be halted before reaching here?"

"You are right, Cody."

"But I will write a line to poor Dean."

This Captain May did, and the scout mounted and rode on his way, the other one having already started to head off the troopers and then continue on to report to Colonel Miles the sad discovery made at the Death's Canyon.

The scouts gone, Buffalo Bill and Captain May got into the coach and made themselves as comfortable as they could, anxious to get all the sleep possible as they expected a hard day of it on the morrow.

They had staked their horses out, though there was no grass or water near for them, and they were forced to make a dry camp of it.

With the first glimpse of dawn coming into the pass, they left the coach, and while Buffalo Bill went at once to work reading "signs," the captain rode back to the camp of his troopers to bring them upon the scene.

In half an hour he returned, and when the sunlight was beginning to peer down into the canyon.

A soldier had been stationed at the opening into the wide space, upon either side, to keep any one coming from the forts back, and the others, after a cold breakfast, washed down with water from their canteens, were placed in positions by Buffalo Bill to make what search they could for any signs they might find of trails.

There were the graves of the dead Indians slain in battle long before; near were the graves of the soldiers who had more lately fallen, and in a row near the trail were buried the victims of those who had haunted the Death's Canyon to kill and to rob.

Near the coach were bodies of the dead miners, and still upon his box was poor Chispa Charlie.

All had been shot, and all had been robbed of every valuable they possessed, their weapons being also taken.

But in the hard ground about the scene of death, there was no trace of a trail.

The tracks of the horses and the wheels of the coach had hardly left an impression.

Each entrance to the scene of the tragedy was most carefully examined by the scout, and no trail led into it, save that of the coach and their own.

From it only the trail of the scout sent to Fort Famine, here and there could be seen.

It was plain that Buffalo Bill was puzzled, that the king of trailers was thwarted for once in his life.

With their tired horses, the two scouts sent to the forts could not ride fast, and it was an hour after sunrise before the soldier on duty reported a force coming from Fort Rest.

Soon after another force came from Fort Famine.

With the former came Colonel Miles himself, and a troop of cavalry, and with the latter was Major Ambrose Dean, with a party of troopers, and all met in the open space where the red deeds had been committed, but they had all come too late to save.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEFT ON THE TRAIL.

THE face of Major Dean was stern and white, for he was a widower, and Hortense was his only child, who had just finished her school-days and had come to make her home with him at Fort Famine, where other officers had their wives and families.

She had begged so hard in her letters to come that at last he had consented, and changing his mind, when he regarded the dangers of the Fatal Trail, he had written her not to come.

But the letter had arrived after her departure, for she had started sooner than she had anticipated.

Warmly did Colonel Miles grasp his hand in sympathy, and then turn to the poor sergeant who had also come to learn what the fate of his wife had been.

"What does it mean, colonel?" asked Major Dean.

"Alas! I do not know, and Cody can give no explanation," was the reply.

"Well, her body not being here, I feel that she must at least be alive; but suffering what?" sadly said the major.

Buffalo Bill was at his wits' end, and could say nothing.

Other scouts had come with the parties from the forts, and these Buffalo Bill had at once set to work, giving them no clue, and was only waiting to hear what they had to report.

While waiting he walked to where Colonel Miles, the major and Captain May were.

"Any clue, Cody?" asked the colonel.

"I sent for my best men, sir, and those from Fort Famine, and all are now at work, and I

hope some may be able to discover what I have failed to do, sir."

"What is your theory?"

"I can discover no trace of a trail, so that would indicate that the murderers were on foot, more likely Indians, and yet it does not look like the work of Indians."

"How so?"

"Chispa Charlie was shot on his box, sir, and neither he or the miners are scalped."

"The soldier is not to be found, and Miss Dean and Sergeant Gale's wife are missing, sir, and what has become of them I cannot say."

"Had Indians attacked from an ambush they would have riddled the stage with bullets, and there is not a fresh mark upon it, only those fired into it on previous occasions."

"All were robbed, and yet the gaudy red sash Chispa Charlie wore was not taken, and an Indian could hardly have resisted that."

"Then you lean to the belief that they were whites who did the work?"

"Yes, colonel, I do; but my men will report as they make a discovery, or give up the game, and then we may know more."

"I have been over the whole scene, and confess myself beaten."

"Then your men will surely be; but what do you think of the soldier, Miss Dean and Gale's wife having been captured and carried off?"

"That is what puzzles me most, sir."

"If the soldier had not been taken I might understand that the two women were taken as hostages, or for ransom; but the soldier's going I cannot yet comprehend."

And it seemed a mystery to all, for not one could give any clue to the mysterious tragedy, enacted there in Death's Canyon.

One by one the scouts came in and each one had the same report to make.

They looked anxious and seemed to feel their inability to make a report of some kind.

But soon had come and all were of the same opinion, that the murderers, be they Indians or road-agents, had covered up their tracks too well to be followed.

As there was no water or grass near, a move must be made, and then Buffalo Bill asked Colonel Miles to allow him to drop out of the line on the march back, and returning to the canyon go on a still hunt alone to solve the mystery.

This request was granted, and Buffalo Bill was to have provisions sent to him by the stage on its return, for a scout was to drive it on to Fort Famine, and back again to Trail End City, on condition that the chief of scouts should remain in the fatal pass and await his coming.

That Buffalo Bill was to remain was known only to Colonel Miles, the scout who was to drive the coach, and to Major Dean.

The latter had desired to remain with the scout, but Buffalo Bill had urged so to the contrary that he had yielded, and gone back with his force to Fort Famine.

After going with the command a few miles, Buffalo Bill silently dropped out when he came to the first stream, staked his horse out to feed, and filling his canteen went back on foot to the scene of the doom which had overtaken Chispa Charlie on the Fatal Trail.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MISSING HORSE.

THE scout who drove the coach on to Fort Famine was a man of nerve, yet one who would not have done so had he not felt that he had his chief to rely on in the return trip through Death's Canyon.

The miners had been buried where they met their death, while the body of poor Chispa Charlie had been laid to rest in the separate row of graves which marked the last resting-place of the drivers who had fallen on the Fatal Trail.

Major Dean had returned to Fort Famine in an agony of suspense about his daughter, as had also the sergeant, but both felt they left the solution of the mystery in the hands of the only man who could solve it, Buffalo Bill.

Colonel Miles had gone back to his command feeling some anxiety regarding Buffalo Bill, for, the mysterious murderers, who never held back from a stage-load of passengers, must be in large enough force to readily get away with one man, even if he was the chief of scouts, who was noted as one "worth a dozen ordinary men."

The coach made its run on to the fort, under the scout Diamond Dan, and started almost at once upon its return, being a day behind schedule time.

The soldiers saw it go with misgivings, and many bade Diamond Dan good-by, expecting never to see him again.

But it had been the wish of Buffalo Bill for it to come without an escort, that he might discover the mystery of the murders in the canyon.

He had explained to Colonel Miles that a guard for the coach might protect it in the canyon, but the moment they left it, there would be an attack elsewhere, and this would not be finding the murderers.

Then too the soldiers could not be spared for the work, and that the sure means to check the

evil by finding the outlaws would be to secretly discover who they were.

The colonel and his officers realized the truth of this argument, and so Buffalo Bill was left alone upon the Fatal Trail.

It was night when Diamond Dan reached the canyon, and he drove into it with misgivings, for he was alone, not a soul caring to make the trip back with him.

He passed the scene of the murders with his heart almost seeming to stand still, and started as he went by and heard a voice behind him say:

"Ho, Dan, there is nobody abroad to-night."

"It is you, chief," cried Diamond Dan with a deep sigh of relief, as Buffalo Bill climbed up over the stage and came to the box.

"Yes, and I have seen not a sign of any one."

"I heard you coming, and was in ambush, ready for an attack, if any came, but they were not here to-night, and so I leaped on the boot and am going on with you."

"You bet I'm glad of it, Bill, for I was scared, I admit it."

"Well, you showed your pluck in going on the coach as you did, Dan, and you shall have full credit for it."

"But you could find no trace of the murderers, Bill?"

"Not the slightest."

"You can't think who they can be?"

"I cannot, for they have covered up their tracks with the cunning of Indians."

"Maybe they be Indians."

"I think not; but my horse is yonder up the valley, so I will mount him and follow you a quarter of a mile behind, in case you are attacked at some other point."

"Keep a little closer, Bill, please, for this be a lonesome trail to travel."

"I will be within hearing, Diamond Dan, never fear."

"Yes, for there is a treasure-box aboard."

"Ah! from the mines?"

"Yes, nigh on ten thousand in dust, I heard."

"All right."

With this Buffalo Bill got down from the box, and, while Diamond Dan drove on he went up the valley for his horse.

To his surprise he found the animal was not there.

He supposed that he had pulled up his stake-ropes and gone astray; but in searching for his saddle and bridle they too were gone.

"Somebody has stolen him."

"Well, I cannot overtake Diamond Dan on foot, that is certain, so I will camp here, look for the trail of my horse in the morning, and when I do not come in behind the coach, Colonel Miles will send after me, I know."

"But who got my horse is the question that I would like answered."

With this the scout rolled his blankets about him and sought forgetfulness in slumber.

CHAPTER X.

NO TRACE.

THE sentinel on the tower at Fort Rest spied in the early morning the coach coming slowly along the trail.

The horses were in a walk and came along as though they had been hard driven.

The coming of the coach was reported to the corporal of the guard, who in turn reported it to his superior officers, and soon after came another report that the driver of the coach was asleep on his box!

The gates were thrown open; the officer of the day met the coach; the team was brought to a halt and then came the startling cry:

"Diamond Dan, the scout driver, is dead!"

The words were true.

There sat Diamond Dan upon his box, his body tied in place by a lariat, his head hanging forward and the reins wrapped around his hands securely.

But, he was dead, and a bullet wound was in his temple.

What did it mean? Where was Buffalo Bill?

These questions could not be answered by a tongue silenced in death, and so the officer of the day hastened to Colonel Miles with the report of the tragedy—another deadly mystery of the Fatal Trail through Death's Canyon!

Colonel Miles was astounded, startled, and Captain May and his troop were at once ordered back over the trail.

They departed within half an hour, while another scout mounted the box and drove the coach on its way to Trail End City, several passengers going in it on the eastward run.

Captain May lost no time on the trail, but went along at a sweeping gallop toward Death's Canyon.

As he neared the dreaded spot, his horses all foaming and panting, they saw a tall form standing in the trail awaiting them.

It was Buffalo Bill.

At sight of him the soldiers broke forth in a cheer, for they expected that they would find his body only.

"Ho, captain, glad to see you."

"But what's the hurry, for your horses have been pushed hard I see?"

"What is the hurry, Cody, when we expected to find you dead?" cried Captain May, sternly.

"Dead?"

"Oh, no, sir; but I suppose it was because I did not follow the coach in, as I told Diamond Dan I would."

"But my horse was spirited away, captain, and I could not."

"Perhaps it is well you did not follow Diamond Dan in, Bill, for he is dead."

The scout started and his bronzed face grew ashen as he repeated the words:

"Diamond Dan dead?"

"Yes, he came in just after dawn, tied to his box, the reins fast in his hands, and with a bullet wound in his left temple."

"My God!"

"Poor, poor Dan!"

"Oh! that I could only have followed him."

"Your horse was stolen, you say, Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"I left Dan right at this spot and went up the valley where I had staked out my horse, a quarter of a mile from here."

"I found him gone, and that my saddle and bridle were also missing."

"To overtake Dan on foot I knew was impossible, with a start of a mile, and besides I wished to have a search for the trail of my horse, feeling sure Colonel Miles would send after me."

"And what was the result of your search, Cody?"

"Captain May, I flatter myself that I am a good trailer, but I can no more find the trail of my horse than I can fly."

"The ground is too hard?"

"Not that, only there is no trail."

"Let us return to the place, Bill, and camp, so we can have another search for it."

The scout led the way, asking as he started off:

"Was the treasure-box also taken, sir?"

"From the coach?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was none there."

"Then it was taken, for there was a box with ten thousand in dust on board, so Dan said."

"I searched the coach, and none was there."

"You found the scene of the hold-up, sir?"

"No, we pushed right on to look you up."

"Well, we can see on our way back where it was, and there must be a trail leading from there."

"Yes, surely."

They had now reached the camping-place and breakfast was cooked, while the horses were staked out.

But, search as they might, no trail led away from the spot where Buffalo Bill had left his horse, though the track leading to it was plainly seen.

After hours spent in search the party started upon the return to the fort, hoping to find the trail from the place where the coach had been held up and Diamond Dan had lost his life.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE MARCH.

WITH the skill of an Indian Buffalo Bill followed the trail of the coach back to the fort.

Behind him came two scouts, who had come with the troop, and then the troopers, all watching for any sign that might have missed the eye of the chief.

Though the passing along of the troop had greatly marred the trail of the coach, still if there had been any tracks leading to and from it on either side the keen eyes of the scouts would have detected them.

But the troop went slowly along, for Buffalo Bill and his two men were on foot, and often came to a halt as they examined the trail.

But just at sunset they came in view of the fort, and soon after Captain May and Buffalo Bill were in the presence of Colonel Miles, the chief of scout's return alive having been greeted with cheers by those in the fort.

The scout made his report, and Captain May told all that he had to say, and then waited for the colonel to speak.

"I do not understand it—I do not know what to say."

"When the coach next goes through, it must have an escort, though a small one, as I am determined to start to-night upon this expedition, to strike the Indians in their villages before they get ready to raid upon us, which they are preparing to do."

"You, Cody, I must have with the command, and Major Dean is to meet us with his force, and thus act as a support, perhaps join us in the attack."

"Now who shall I have to guard the coach?"

"Allow me to suggest, sir, that you order Bent Bolt, who is the next driver, to go through by daylight, remaining at the fort all night, and to come back the following day, sir."

"I will do so, for this will do away with an escort, which I am not allowed to furnish, and only would do so in case of direst necessity."

"But could you not send a couple of your

men, Cody, to scout in Death's Canyon, as you did, and thus serve as a protection, and perhaps discover something about those fiends?"

"I can, sir, and will do so."

"I will send two of my best scouts."

"Do so, and they might go to-morrow night, prepared to remain until you recall them, so that the drivers will know that there is help near."

The orders were given then for the troops to get ready for the march up into the Indian country, one troop going at once, by way of Death's Canyon, to Fort Famine, to order Major Dean also to move with his men to a certain point in the mountains, and join the force from Fort Rest.

Buffalo Bill picked out of the Scouts' League two of his men, and ordered them to take their best horses, plenty of ammunition, and provisions for several weeks, and go to Death's Canyon, or near it, where they could camp, but to be on duty by night in the canyon, and by day when the coach was expected through.

It was just after midnight when the command, consisting of five companies of mounted infantry, one battery of four guns and two troops of cavalry, with a dozen scouts under Buffalo Bill, moved out of the fort, at their head being Colonel Miles himself, who had almost stripped the stockade of defenders to deal a blow against the red-skins in their stronghold.

Just before dawn, the troop having arrived with orders, Major Dean left Fort Famine with three companies of mounted infantry, two troops of cavalry, and a section of light artillery, while half a dozen scouts were in the advance.

With this force of one hundred men Colonel Miles hoped to deal a very severe blow upon the Indians.

The two commands met at noon the next day, thirty miles out from the forts, and went into camp until nightfall, when they intended making a forced march of thirty miles more so as to attack the Indian village at dawn, thus surprising them in their stronghold.

Major Dean's face was pale with sorrow and suspense, as he greeted his commander, and the two officers held a long talk together over the situation, and the fact that no clue had been found as to the fate of the three captives taken from Chispa Charlie's coach, or the perpetrators of the deed.

"I live in hopes that we may find them in the Indian villages, for you will attack the lower village, sir, upon your retreat," said Major Dean.

"Yes, I shall strike the stronghold at dawn, wipe it out if in our power to do so, and retreating rapidly the fifteen miles to the hunting-village, will fall upon that, thus giving the Indians a double lesson to remember, for, once we have done so, we will have troops to spare for the Overland Trails and hunt down the road-agents," was the rejoinder of Colonel Miles.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOW FALLS.

IT was well known to Colonel Miles that there were a couple of thousand warriors in the Sioux stronghold, which he was to attack, and half as many more in the hunting-village overlooking the plains, where they got their game.

But he was well aware that to keep them from getting on the offensive against the two posts, he must do some daring act that would strike terror to their hearts.

He was also aware that in the stronghold there were all of a hundred white captives, men, women and children, and these could only be released by just such a bold stroke as it was his intention to deliver.

His little army was a command of veterans, men who had long fought red-skins, and knew that a stampede meant death to all, so that he could rely upon them, while Buffalo Bill and his scouts were one and all heroes.

The little army had camped in a secure hiding-place by day, building no fires until after nightfall, when supper was cooked, and all prepared for the rapid march to the Indian stronghold.

The scouts started well in advance, to be sure there was no ambush, and the men mounting their well-rested horses, and with the wheels of the guns heavily wrapped, to prevent sound, they moved out upon their march.

At two o'clock a halt was called, for the stronghold of the Indians was in view, a mile away, and Buffalo Bill reported all quiet there.

The men and horses had a couple of hours' rest, then an early breakfast, which was cold, however, and Buffalo Bill having explained the situation of the stronghold, there were three columns of infantry, dismounted, sent against it.

The guns were placed in position, to open fire when the infantry had gained places for action, and the cavalymen stood by their horses, ready to mount and at them, when their time to strike should come, the scouts taking places where they could do most good.

Just as the gray of dawn began to steal over the mountain-tops, so that the gunners could see where to fire, the order was given, and six guns, two twelve-pounders and four sixes, flashed forth red flames and sent terrific roars echoing from cliff to cliff.

The shells went hurtling down into the village, bursting viciously among the tepees, and scattering death and destruction around, for Buffalo Bill had made known where the captives were kept, so that their position was avoided by the gunners.

It was a complete surprise, and after several rounds from the guns, the infantry, with wild cheers, advanced upon the stronghold at a double-quick.

As they reached the village and their muskets began to rattle, the cavalymen mounted and rode down to the attack also.

Outnumbered as they were, the soldiers soon saw that the fight was theirs, and they pushed rapidly on, stampeding the women and children, driving the warriors before them and setting fire to the tepees.

The captives were rescued and sent quickly on the trail leading to the hunting-village, whither two guns, a company of mounted infantry and a troop of cavalry were now marching.

The ponies in the corral had been stampeded, but many were captured, and within an hour's time the stronghold was a ruin, its people fugitives among the mountains, save the braves who were rallying for a blow against their victors.

Down upon the hunting-valley swooped the retreating victors, and they were met by the warriors there who had been alarmed by the firing, and hoped to check the retreat.

But the guns cut gaps in their ranks, the infantry charged, and when the cavalry came in sight the red-skin warriors broke in disorder and fled for their lives, leaving their village unprotected.

Here, too, other captives were rescued, and the tepees of the red-skins were set on fire.

Rapidly then the retreat was kept up, the cavalry protecting the rear, until the pursuit became too hot, when the guns would be wheeled about and the savages sent to the rear by a few well-aimed shots.

That night the soldiers' camp was besieged, but no attack was made, for the red-skins had received too severe a lesson, and were not in the full force of their warriors.

They however sent many a shot into the camp, but retreated at dawn, and the march back to the fort was begun, a camp of a couple of days being made at the point where the commands from the fort had met on their way up into the mountains.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VICTORS RETURN.

COLONEL MILES had camped on the way back, to check any advance the warriors might attempt to make against the forts in their desperation.

The scouts had been left behind under Buffalo Bill to report any movement of the red-skins that might look hostile, and so the soldiers awaited their coming.

The dead had been buried, and the wounded and captives who had been rescued, a hundred in number, were sent on to the forts.

But when the third day passed and Buffalo Bill came in to report that the red-skins who had pursued, had returned to the mountains, and all these had been too badly hurt, and were too much demoralized, to recover for some time, the commands divided and marched for their respective forts.

The hope of Major Dean, that he would find his daughter a captive in one of the Indian villages, had not been realized, and the closest questioning of those who were rescued, failed to discover that they knew aught of her.

Nor could it be ascertained from the captives that the Indians were in any way connected with the perpetrators of the foul deeds in Death's Canyon, for such had been the opinion of many.

"I have only you to depend on now, Cody, so I leave all in your hands," sadly said Major Dean as he parted with the scout.

"I shall do all in my power, major, to return your daughter to you, and to punish her kidnappers."

"That the three captives taken from the coach, were not found in the Indian villages, is to me a strong hope that they are held for ransom by road-agents, and that no harm will befall them."

"It is unfortunate, indeed, but from all accounts Miss Dean is a very plucky young lady, and will bear her captivity with a good grace."

"Then you will go again upon the trail of those Death's Canyon murderers, as soon as you return to the fort, Cody?"

"I will, sir, and you know that I now have two men on duty in the canyon, and as the coach is to go through to-day, we may get news upon our arrival, and you shall be at once informed of the result, major."

"I thank you, Cody, and I rely upon you," and grasping the scout's hand the major rode on after his command.

As he passed to the front of Colonel Miles's command, Buffalo Bill was called by that officer, who said:

"Well, Cody, we gave the red-skins a lesson to remember?"

"You did, indeed, sir, and one they will not soon forget, for you killed and wounded many, and it will take a long time for them to recover from the blow you dealt them, sir."

"It was a brave move, Colonel Miles, and you deserved the success you have won."

"Thank you, Cody, and a success which your valuable services made possible, aided by the brave men under my command."

"We lost heavily, I admit, but we rescued many poor captives, and have greatly strengthened our position on the frontier."

"But now what are we going to learn at the fort about the doings in Death's Canyon?"

"I hope my two men have made some discovery, sir, and that Ben Bolt going through Death's Canyon by day will avoid the fate of the other drivers, but I am yet doubtful, sir."

"As I am; but what do you think of not finding Miss Dean, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier, captives in neither of the Indian villages, Cody?"

"That Indians are not the murderers, sir, that haunt Death's Canyon."

"But white men are?"

"Yes, sir."

"But who?"

"That is to be discovered, sir; but they are outlaws, road-agents of course."

"And where are they?"

"That I must find out, sir."

"No one reports seeing them, or having done so."

"Very few live, sir, to make any report of an attack on a coach on the Fatal Trail."

"That is true."

"Yet do you think Miss Dean and the other two were slain?"

"If so, sir, we cannot find their bodies, and if not killed then the road-agents acted differently toward them from the way they served their other victims."

"You are right, and, if they killed them, for some reason of their own, concealed their bodies."

"I do not believe that they killed them, Colonel Miles."

"Miss Dean might be held for ransom, for she is an heiress, yet why the sergeant's wife and the young soldier?"

"That I do not know, sir; but did you discover to which command the young soldier was going, sir?"

"I did not, for nothing was known of him whatever at either fort."

"He may have been on leave, sir, going to Fort Famine to visit some relative, or friend."

"I will find out from the stage company what his name was, and then we can discover who he was," and saluting his colonel, Buffalo Bill rode on ahead of the column, which late in the afternoon came in sight of Fort Rest.

CHAPTER XIV.

BEN BOLT NEXT.

BEING ahead as a scout, Buffalo Bill was the first to enter the fort, and his inquiry regarding Ben Bolt, the second of the volunteer drivers to take the stage through, was quickly made.

The answer was that Ben Bolt had come through two days before alone on the coach, no passengers daring to venture, and that he had been detained all night, according to orders from Colonel Miles, and dispatched the following morning for Fort Famine.

He had been given orders to remain at Fort Famine all night, returning by day through the Death's Canyon.

Had he started early he was due hours before, and even starting late upon his return, he was long behind the time for his arrival.

Buffalo Bill looked serious, and waited for the coming up of the column at the head of the command.

Those who had gone in with the wounded soldiers, and the captives, had told of the double victory, so that the whole contingent left in the fort turned out to welcome the command.

Guns were fired, cheers resounded and the band played, as the tired soldiers filed into the stockade.

While they marched to their respective barracks, the colonel gave orders that a line of scouts should be thrown around the fort, that the guards should be doubled and the men should, as it were, sleep on their arms, for he did not know but that the cunning savages might seek revenge, expecting to catch the garrison off its guard, by rushing in upon them with an overwhelming force of warriors.

These orders issued, the colonel turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"Now, Cody, you have something to communicate."

Buffalo Bill told what he had heard and the colonel also looked serious.

"I will start on the trail, sir, as soon as I have had supper and gotten a fresh horse," said Buffalo Bill.

"But you are worn out."

"No indeed, sir, I am all right, colonel."

"Well, it would be the best thing to do, Cody, I admit, if the coach does not come in meanwhile."

"Who will you take with you?"

"I shall go alone, sir."

"Better take some force along in case you need aid."

"Well, sir, I will take half a dozen scouts, and they can camp in the valley this side of the canyon, where I left my horse, while I will go through alone and on foot."

"You will be taking big risks."

"It will be the only way, sir, to find out who these murderers are."

"Well, I trust all to you, Cody, only do not be too rash," was the colonel's response, and the scout departed.

Going to his quarters, he selected half a dozen of his best men, and having had supper, mounted a fresh horse and rode away from the fort, taking the Fatal Trail.

No sign of the coach had been reported, and the more he thought of it, the more certain Buffalo Bill felt that either Ben Bolt had never reached Fort Famine, or, doing so, had been killed upon his return, for it could not be that the brave fellow had, at the last moment, failed to make the attempt to go through.

On to the camping-place at a brisk canter went the scout and his men, and there he left them, along with his horse.

He had expected to find the bones of the other two scouts there, but in the darkness they were not visible, as a short search revealed.

Then he set out on horseback, with a scout accompanying him to lead his horse back after he should have gone a few miles.

The scout went with him near to the scene so fatal to the drivers, when the chief dismounted and sent him back to the camp.

"If you do not see me, or hear from me by noon, Bob, come after me all of you, for I may need you," were his parting orders.

Then he went on his way on foot, and after half an hour approached the open space where were the graves of the dead victims of the mysterious murderers of Death's Canyon.

He went cautiously along, gliding among the stunted trees and boulders that were there, and at last saw something loom up ahead of him.

"It is the coach," he muttered, and at once became still more cautious, for a closer look through the darkness revealed the fact that the horses were there also.

But was it Ben Bolt, the brave driver?

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT BUFFALO BILL DISCOVERED.

THE scout remained for a long while silently watching the coach and waiting.

He saw that the horses were restless, and swerved considerably, yet no voice was heard soothing them.

At last he said to himself:

"There is no living being there, that is certain."

"Poor Ben Bolt is there; yes, I am sure of it now."

"But he is dead."

With this the chief of scouts moved from his hiding-place, and cautiously approached the coach.

The horses quickly discovered him, and one of them neighed a welcome.

This was further proof to Buffalo Bill that if a human being was there it was a dead one.

He spoke soothingly to the horses, and saw that they were glad of his coming.

Then he approached the coach.

Upon the box he saw a dark object, and quickly he mounted to the driver's seat.

It was Ben Bolt; but he was dead!

The scout muttered an imprecation, and a quick search revealed that the driver had been shot at his post, his body falling back upon the top of the coach, the reins still clutched in his stiffened fingers.

Ben had been robbed, for his pockets were turned inside out, and, to prevent the team from going on, the wheels of the coach, had been firmly lashed together to lock them.

"Where are my two scouts, Bennett and Hill?" the scout leader asked himself, as he looked about him, trying in vain to pierce the darkness.

Then, revolver in hand, for he had gone about his search prepared for any emergency, he opened the coach door.

He could not see within, for it was so intensely dark; but he stretched forth his hand and felt within.

He touched a leg, and then another.

Yes, there were two forms in the coach, both in the back seat, and both dead.

"No; one leg seemed warm, and quickly springing upon the step he seized the hand and felt the pulse."

It was beating, yet feebly.

In an instant the chief of scouts had taken a match from his case and struck it.

The flame revealed to Buffalo Bill the two scouts whom he had sent to protect the coach through Death's Canyon.

He uttered a cry as he recognized them, in

the flash of the light of the match, and having seen that one of the men was alive, for he had heard a low moan, he took the dead one from the seat, made the living man as comfortable as he could with the cushions and closed the coach door.

Then the lashings of the wheels were cut, and mounting the box, Buffalo Bill placed Ben Bolt on top, tying his body so that it would not fall off, and seizing the reins sent the horses along at a thundering pace.

They were only too anxious to go, and went at a slapping gallop over a trail on which only a driver of skill and nerve would dare force them at such a rate.

As he neared the camp of the scouts, Buffalo Bill opened fire with his revolver, and by the time he passed along the trail nearest to them, they came dashing down to meet him, mounted and ready for battle.

"Ho, men! go to the Death Canyon, but go on foot when you get near it, leaving one of your number to keep the horses."

"At daylight look for trails, and I will be back as soon as I can return and there join you."

"Ben Bolt is dead on top this coach, and within are Bennett and Hill, the latter still alive, so I am going to see if he can be saved by getting him to the fort."

With this the lash fell upon the horses and the eager team dashed away once more at the same rattling speed as before, on the trail to the fort, twenty miles distant.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN VAIN.

BUFFALO BILL came in sight of the fort just as the sun was rising.

The sentinel on the watch-tower reported the coming of the coach at the full speed of the horses, the driver laying on the lash.

Soon after he reported that the driver was not Ben Bolt, but Buffalo Bill, but that there was a dead body on the top of the coach.

Word was at once sent to Colonel Miles, so that when the coach dashed into the stockade that officer was up and dressed.

As Buffalo Bill whirled through the gate he called out:

"Arouse the surgeon at once, for I have a wounded man here."

Halting at the station, Buffalo Bill sprang to the ground, threw open the stage door and placing his hand upon the pulse of the wounded man, cried:

"Thank Heaven, he is still alive."

"But he has been hard hit, and more than once, too."

He then lifted the wounded scout tenderly from the coach, and placed him upon the stretcher which four soldiers had hastily brought from the hospital.

The surgeon was there also, and ordered the wounded man carried quickly to a cabin near the hospital, as Buffalo Bill said earnestly:

"Save him, doctor, not only for his own sake, for he is a splendid fellow, but because he can tell us who these murderers of Death's Canyon are—he can solve this accursed mystery, if you save him."

"I will do all in my power, Cody, but he is a desperately-wounded man," was the surgeon's response.

Buffalo Bill then hastened on to headquarters, where he found Colonel Miles ready to receive him.

"You have news, Cody?"

"Yes, sir, very sad news," and Buffalo Bill made known all that had occurred since his departure from the fort.

"This is appalling, Cody, most appalling," said the colonel, earnestly.

"It is, sir, but the more determined am I to sift the whole mystery to the bottom."

"I am glad to hear you say this, Buffalo Bill, for it means that the guilty ones will yet be found and punished."

"But what is to be done now?"

"I'll send one of my scouts on with the coach, sir, and the report to Trail End, and Harkaway Harry will bring it back, and my man with him."

"But will Harkaway Harry dare drive the coach through after these last murders?"

"Yes, sir, he will, for I know the man."

"And then?"

"When he goes through Death's Canyon, sir, be it night or day, going and coming, I will be on hand to lend any aid that he may need, and discover where these murderers are."

"Not alone, surely?"

"Yes, sir, I'll play a lone hand on the next run of the coach along the Fatal Trail, and after that, if I do not make a discovery I'll try another plan, which I have yet to make known to you, sir."

"All right, I feel that the affair is in good hands, Cody, so you shall have your way."

"Now what hope does Doctor Brandon give you of saving Hill's life?"

"None, sir; but while there is life there is hope, is my belief, and if he can only bring him around to talk, much will have been gained."

"Let us go then and see what the result is so far; but I forget that you need rest and food."
 "Don't mind me, colonel, for I'll get breakfast soon and then take a fresh horse for camp, where I can sleep for some hours."

"Well, we will go together to the hospital."

The colonel and Buffalo Bill then walked to the hospital and Doctor Brandon met them at the door.

"What hope, Brandon?" asked the colonel.

"I fear none, sir, for he has a wound in the left lung, and another in the right side, with a third that grazed the skull."

"Had he not arrived when he did, he could not have lasted much longer, for he was bleeding freely."

"He is unconscious then?"

"Wholly unconscious, colonel, in spite of all efforts to rouse him; but he has a splendid constitution and may rally."

"Heaven grant it."

"How long, Surgeon Brandon, would you think he had been wounded when I got to him, which was at two o'clock?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"I should say for four or five hours at least, from what observation I was enabled to make," was the reply.

"Then he was shot late in the afternoon?"

"He must have been."

"And in passing through the Death's Canyon in daylight?"

"Yes."

"This is remarkable, for there were Ben Bolt the driver and my two scouts for the murderers to face, so there surely must have been a large force that ambushed them," said Buffalo Bill thoughtfully, and it was evident that he was more and more worried over the continual mystery turning up in the deeds done in the Death's Canyon.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LONE WATCHER.

BUFFALO BILL paid another visit to the hospital, before leaving the fort in the afternoon, for the colonel had told him to get his breakfast and seek rest until two o'clock, as he saw that the scout was beginning to feel the strain upon him.

A scout had gone on with the coach to Trail End, and was to return to the fort with Harkaway Harry, or at once, if that driver backed down.

But Surgeon Brandon could give Buffalo Bill no more hope for Hill the scout, and so he mounted a fresh horse and dashed away toward the Death's Canyon.

He reached the camping place before sunset, and there found two of the scouts with the horses, the other having remained on the search.

Before these two could say anything regarding the search for the trail of the murderers, the other four scouts came in sight.

"Ho! pards, any news?" called out Buffalo Bill as they appeared.

They looked a trifle confused at seeing their chief, and one said:

"No, chief, we could not find even the photograph of a trail and we looked close too!"

"Why did you leave the canyon before I came to join you?"

"Fact is, chief, we saw night was coming on, and that canyon hain't no place for live folks when the sun goes down."

"You were afraid, eh?"

"You knows us all, Bill, and is aware we don't scare easy, but that canyon, and what goes on there is out of ther common, yer see, and we put it to ther vote as ter whether we should go or stay."

"Well?"

"Ther vote were unanimous that we should light out."

"Well, boys, I can hardly believe you; but you should never desert your post, you know."

"That's so, Chief Cody; but them we was guarding was dead folks and they didn't need us, and if live folks was about they war so hid as ter make dead folks out of us when night come on."

"All right, we will go to camp and have supper, and then I will go on foot to the canyon and see if I can find any spook or outlaw."

"Don't do it, Bill!"

"Why not?"

"Them as has turned up their toes in that canyon never gets a chance ter draw a weapon, that is certain."

"I'll have to take the chances, you know, and I was there last night."

"Yes, and Ben Bolt and two of our pards went under last night."

"They were killed in the afternoon, but then Hill may survive, though the chances are against him."

"I'm glad to hear that, Bill; but couldn't he talk and tell yer anything?"

"No, he was unconscious."

"Well, if he could talk he could tell it all."

"I only hope that he will be able to do so," and with this Buffalo Bill rode on to the camp.

He ate a hearty supper, enjoyed his pipe, and just as the shadows began to fall upon

the valley, started off on foot for the Death's Canyon.

His men begged him not to go, but seeing him determined to do so, wanted to go with him.

But he said that one could escape notice when half a dozen could not, and he would go alone.

He had put on moccasins, so that his step was noiseless, and as he disappeared in the gathering gloom, he drew a revolver in each hand, thus carrying them ready for instant use.

Reaching the canyon he moved more cautiously and slowly, and at last came to the opening which had been the scene of so many red deeds, all of which still lay buried in mystery the deepest.

He crept along among the stunted trees and the rocks until he reached the spot where he had twice found the stage-coach.

All was as silent as the grave.

No wolf was even whining around in search of food, and the weird, ghoully spot seemed even deserted by wild beasts and night birds.

The chief of scouts stood for a long while gazing about him through the almost impenetrable gloom, his thoughts busy.

Not far away were the graves, the white boards marking the last resting-places of the brave drivers of the Fatal Trail, dimly seen in the somber light, or rather darkness, for light there was none.

At last the scout felt a drowsy feeling creeping over him.

He had gone through much, and was very tired, so he decided to lie down and rest, knowing that he would awaken, fatigued as he was, at the first sound.

So he spread his blankets and lay down in a thicket to sleep.

When he awoke he sprung to his feet in surprise, for the sun was shining brightly, and he had not been disturbed through the night by outlaw, spook or wandering spirit.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ONE MORE TRIAL.

BUFFALO BILL felt mortified at his having slumbered so soundly through the night, and yet he could not but think that there had been no one near, or he would instinctively have felt their presence and awakened.

His training had been such that he had come to have the acute hearing of a dog, the instinct of a wild beast almost, to protect himself and discover danger near.

He looked about him and knew that the sun was all of two hours high.

Then he searched around for any trail, but only the stale ones were visible here and there in the hard soil.

As he could make no discovery, and the stage was not due coming that way again for days, he thought it best to go back to the fort with his men, and start off again upon a lone scout just before Harkaway Harry should come through, to see what fate would be his.

So back to the camp he started, to meet his comrades coming to look for him, they having become anxious regarding his safety.

"Any news, chief?" asked one.

"Nothing, for I could find no trail of any kind to indicate where the murderers came from, and whither they went."

"Did you stay in the canyon all night, Pard Bill?" another asked.

"Oh, yes, and slept serenely most of the time."

"Yer slept?"

"Yes."

"I w'u'dn't close my eyes in that canyon, at night, for a dozen ponies."

"Why not?"

"With all them graves around."

"The dead would not trouble you, Nick, while the living would."

"Waal, I can't git familiar with dead folks, no matter how I tries."

"When a man has handed in his chips, somehow I fears him; yes, I is afeerd o' a leetle dead body, even, for they is so silent, so white, and seem to be thinking so deep about what they is seeing in ther speritland."

"No, sir, no graveyards in mine."

Buffalo Bill laughed at Nick's earnest way of describing his fear of the dead, but not another one of the scouts did.

They all looked serious, and there was no doubt they felt as their comrade did, while their commander rose the higher in their estimation from his utter disregard of the supernatural.

So back to the fort went the scouts, and Buffalo Bill made his report to Colonel Miles, with sincere regret that he had nothing to tell to cast any light upon the situation.

But he told the colonel that it was his intention to go ahead of the coach at its next run, and to start the night before, taking up position in the Death Canyon so as to be on the spot long ahead of time, and endeavor to anticipate the coming of the murderers.

"You will take men with you, Cody?"

"No, colonel, I will go alone, for a party of men would surely be seen."

"Upon one condition you can go then."

"Yes, colonel."

"Promise to obey my commands."

"Certainly, sir."

"Then you can go upon condition that you shall find the securest of hiding-places, and then, no matter what occurs, you are not to venture forth, or attempt a rescue of the driver, if there are over three men to fight."

"Three men, sir?"

"Yes, three of these outlaws, murderers and robbers, for that number I feel you can stand a chance with, but more than that I do not wish you to face, even if you have the advantage of a surprise upon them."

"Yes, sir."

"You promise?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, under those circumstances you can go."

"May I ask, Colonel Miles, if there is any change for the better in Scout Hill's condition?"

"None."

"The surgeon then has no hope?"

"He has hope, yet it is so faint he hardly dares express it."

"The poor fellow lies in a state of coma, and neither speaks or moves."

"He may rally yet, but the chances are against him, though Surgeon Brandon is doing all in his power to save him, in fact keeps by him night and day, for he knows how much depends upon his being able to state what occurred, independent of his wish to save him."

Soon after Buffalo Bill took his leave, and going to his quarters he found that there was much excitement in the fort about the murders committed in Death's Canyon.

The days passed slowly until the eve of the one on which the coach was expected to arrive from Trail End, when Buffalo Bill, after reporting to Colonel Miles, mounted his horse and rode away toward Death's Canyon to go upon his lonely sentinel duty.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE THIRD VOLUNTEER.

CASEY the scout it was who carried the coach of poor Ben Bolt back to Trail End City.

It was behind time, and a most anxious feeling existed among all the frontier settlement as to the fate of Ben Bolt.

All had heard how Chispa Charlie had gone under, along with the three miners, and how the young lady, the elderly woman had most mysteriously disappeared and it was not known whether they were captives or had been slain.

Then, without a moment of hesitation, in the face of such tidings, brave Ben Bolt had reported himself ready to take the coach out, even after the news had come in that Diamond Dan the scout had also been slain upon the box.

He had found no passengers however, so had gone alone on the fatal run.

When he did not return on time men began to surmise the worst, and when Casey the scout came in and told his story of the death of Ben Bolt and the Scout Bennett, while the other scout, Hill, lay wounded, perhaps dying in the fort hospital, there was a general murmur of indignation against the unknown murderers, and a belief that Harkaway Harry should not go.

"No one will call him a coward if he don't," said one, and he echoed the sentiments of nearly all.

If there were any who thought he should go, they were those who were his enemies for some reason or other.

The night Scout Casey brought the coach in, the gathering at the saloon of The Wayside Hotel was enormous, including all the people in Trail End City with very few exceptions.

They played cards, drank, swore and canvassed the going of Harkaway Harry, the remark often being heard that he was a fool to go to sure death.

"He hain't a-going," said a rough-looking man with an evil face.

"Who says so?" asked one.

"I does."

"How do you know, Jake Kelly, that Harkaway isn't going?"

"I knows by what I knows of him."

"What is that?"

The man saw that every eye was upon him now, a dead silence had fallen upon the room, and he had to uphold his position taken against the young stage-driver.

So he said:

"I knows he hain't got ther grit ter go, and when he said he would it were jist a game of bluff."

"You lie, Jake Kelly!" rung out in a clear voice from the crowd, followed by the words:

"And I am coming to make you eat your words, so, pards, give us room."

The speaker was Harkaway Harry himself, and he had just entered the saloon accompanied by Scout Casey, who had been up in the mountains to find him, and tell him of the fate of Ben Bolt.

At his defiant words, and quick resenting of the charge against him by Jake Kelly, a cheer

arose, while the crowd scattered right and left to open a lane between the two men, for they had learned by sad experience what being in the way meant.

Hardly had the lane opened when the two men stood alone, Jake Kelly having drawn a revolver in each hand, while Harkaway Harry had not yet grasped his weapon.

But as Jake Kelly opened fire Harkaway Harry, as quick as the lightning's flash, had his revolver out, and pulled trigger.

The bullet crushed into Jake Kelly's brain, and he dropped dead, while Harkaway Harry called out:

"Is Doc Sands here, for I've got a leaden pill in my leg."

The doctor was there, and going to The Wayside, the bullet from Kelly's revolver was quickly extracted and the wound dressed.

"That settles it with you, Harry, for yer won't drive now," said a miner.

"You are mistaken, for I'd drive that hearse on the run if the bullet had half killed me," was the gritty response of the young driver.

And he kept his word, for when the day rolled round for the coach to start, Harkaway Harry ordered the men to hitch up and drive around to the door of The Wayside, giving his well-known bugle call to let the passengers know that all was ready for the start.

"Heaven protect you, Harry," called out Pete Porter, and many a good will followed the plucky young driver, as with an empty coach, but with Scout Casey sitting upon the box by his side, he departed upon his perilous run that must take him where all felt sure that certain death awaited him.

CHAPTER XX.

THE UNSEEN SENTINEL.

It was the night before the coach was expected, though, with Harkaway Harry upon the box, that Buffalo Bill quietly saddled his horse and had a scout ride out of the stockade-gate with him.

Then he went to see Colonel Miles, and found Captain May with him.

"I am ready to start, sir," said the chief of scouts.

"Well, Cody, I dread to see you go alone, and yet you know best what you can do."

"But remember your promise."

"I will, sir."

"I'll court-martial you if you break your pledge," said the colonel, with a smile.

"I'll remember, sir."

"I sent my horse out, with a scout riding him, sir, and would like leave to slip out the headquarters gate, for I wish to be reported on the sick-list, and my going not be known."

"All right, Captain May will go with you to the headquarters gate, and bring me back the key."

The captain was most willing to do so, and with a shake of the hand Buffalo Bill left the colonel, and soon passed out of the gate in the stockade road.

"I will send the scout here at once, sir, for he is but a short distance away," and Buffalo Bill bade the captain good-by and hastened out upon the prairie.

He soon found the scout, with his horse, and said:

"Like, you must not be seen going back through the main entrance on foot, so go to the headquarters gate and Captain May will let you in."

"All right, Bill, and luck to you," said the scout, as Buffalo Bill leaped into his saddle and rode away in the darkness.

He took the stage-trail to Fort Famine, and when he came to the creek, the last bit of water for many miles, he turned up the bank, and a quarter of a mile away found the camping-ground where his men had awaited him before.

He went further up the valley to where there was an open space, and the grass was long and plentiful.

Here he staked out his horse so that he could go to the edge of the creek and drink, as well as get food, and then he went into a crevice of the rocks and cooked his supper.

This disposed of, and enough cooked besides for him to have a couple of days' cold provisions, he went on foot toward Death's Canyon.

It was a couple of hours before dawn when he reached the canyon, but he soon found a secure hiding-place, within easy pistol-range of the graves and the spot where the coach had always been held up.

Spreading his blankets he lay down to rest, with the air of a man who had ample leisure upon his hands.

The morning came but he did not move from his position, but as patiently as an Indian ate his cold breakfast and remained in hiding.

Just at noon he heard the rumble of wheels, and at once he was on the alert.

He had brought his repeating-rifle with him, and this was placed ready to grasp at an instant's notice, while his revolvers were in his hand, as he crouched ready to attack the moment any foe of Harkaway Harry revealed himself.

In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten his promise to Colonel Mills, and there is no doubt but that he would have fought six or eight men, did they appear, for his position was well chosen among the rocks, shadowed by stunted trees, and with his deadly aim and a surprise he felt he could render a good account of himself.

The coach drew nearer and was coming along at a snapping pace.

It must come within twenty-five feet of his position, so he would have a good chance to see all that took place.

Nearer and nearer it came and suddenly rolled into view in the open space in the canyon, which had been fatal to so many people.

On it came, with Harkaway Harry alone on the box, his reins grasped well in hand, his whole attitude that of a man on the alert.

As it drew nearer Buffalo Bill saw that though Harkaway Harry's face was pale, it was stern and fearless, like one who would do or die.

A moment more and the coach swept by, the driver not knowing that help was near, for the bold sentinel was unseen, his presence unknown.

And out of the shadows sprung no foes, and Harkaway Harry had run the gantlet in safety, on the outward trip at least.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE RETURN RUN.

"WELL! that time the coach went through without a hold-up."

"Can it be that the murderers have gotten booty enough, or have become satiated in their greed for human life, I wonder?"

"Ah! I forget! there is a return run, a second gantlet for Harkaway Harry to pass through."

"And here I must wait, for I dare not leave my position for a minute."

"It is a long wait, but I guess I can stand it," So mused Buffalo Bill after the coach had gone by.

He rearranged his blankets, ate a cold dinner, washed down by water from his canteen, and then settled himself on the watch for anything that might be seen in the Fatal Canyon.

"That Harkaway Harry is a plucky fellow, and I should hate to see harm befall him."

"He went by, ready to die if need be, but full of grit, as his plan really showed, and it was no fixed expression either, for he little dreamed that I was near."

"Well, it's to calmly wait now until to-morrow, so I must bring my Indian training of patience to bear upon myself."

Thus the afternoon passed slowly away.

A hungry wolf trotted into the canyon, sniffed at the new-made graves, and then, scenting danger, suddenly skulked away.

A bird of prey, as though recalling a spot where it had gotten food before, bound over the canyon, and then alighted not fifty feet from where the scout lay in ambush.

Soon after several deer came bounding through the canyon, as though in fright of pursuers, and Buffalo Bill was at once upon the *qui vive*.

But, no one came into view and at last the shadows began to fall upon the valley.

Afar off in the distant mountain-tops the sunlight still lingered, but this soon faded from view and intense darkness rested upon all.

Then the scout settled himself for slumber, and was soon serenely sleeping, wholly undisturbed by his weird and dismal surroundings.

The night passed away, and it was another cold breakfast of meat and bread with water to wash it down, yet apparently the meal was relished.

The scout was there for work, and he was willing to put up with anything to discover the secret he sought to unravel.

As the hours crept by he looked to his weapons, placed his repeating-rifle in position for ready use, got his revolver within easy reach and waited.

Noon came and he was all alive for work, be it what it might.

Then came the distant rumble of wheels.

Not a human being had yet shown himself in the canyon.

No foe had appeared.

Could it be that the murderers of the canyon had really given up their red work for gold?

It would seem so. Was Harkaway Harry to pass the deadly gantlet a second time in safety?

Such were the thoughts that filled Buffalo Bill's mind as the sound of the coming wheels grew louder and louder.

"Harkaway Harry is driving very slowly this time, not like his run through on the outward trip."

"Well, I can see no danger awaiting him here, and I am half a mind to go on with him to the camp, thus saving a walk to my horse."

"Ha! there comes the stage into view, and—great Heavens! there is no driver on the box!" cried Buffalo Bill suddenly springing from his place of ambush.

The words of the scout were but too true: there was no driver upon the box!

Where was Harkaway Harry?

The team of six horses came trotting slowly along, the reins made fast around the brake on right of the coach.

But the driver was not there!

Did not the horses know this?

Were they not doing their duty faithfully in taking the coach to the fort?

There was no need for Buffalo Bill to remain longer in ambush, he well knew.

The harm had been done before the coach reached Death's Canyon, as once before had been the case.

So Buffalo Bill left his hiding-place and ran down into the trail.

He called to the horses and they halted.

They seemed to be glad to have the responsibility removed from them of carrying the coach to Fort Rest.

Having halted the team, Buffalo Bill walked to the coach and threw open the door, starting back at what he beheld there.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST OF THE VOLUNTEER TRIO.

WHAT Buffalo Bill beheld in the coach, when he threw open the door, was enough to startle him.

There sat Harkaway Harry upon the back seat, his hands and feet manacled, and his form tied upright, for the bullet wound in the center of his forehead showed that he was dead.

Upon his heart, fastened there with black pins, was a placard upon which were a skull and cross-bones in black, a red dagger, and the words in crimson:

"Let another man dare drive this trail, and this shall be his fate!"

Buffalo Bill's face grew stern as death, as he read this placard on the dead stage-driver's breast, and his eyes burned brightly, while from between his clinched teeth came the words:

"Another driver gone to his death; but I will drive this trail in spite of all threats."

He placed his hand upon that of the dead driver, to discover that the flesh was still warm—proof that he could not have been long dead.

"I will drive back over the trail and find the spot," he muttered.

Then he mounted the box, wheeled the team about and started upon the back track.

His eyes carefully searched the trail on either side for the spot where the coach had been held up.

But on and on he went and no such place was visible.

He continued along the trail, however, though convinced that he had surely passed the spot where the coach had been halted.

Then a desire seized him to go on to Fort Famine.

He reached the relay and found that Harkaway Harry had passed there in safety.

"I am going on to Fort Famine, Murdock, and shall return over the trail by night, so have the coach ready for me," he said to the stock-tender out at Relay Number Four.

"What! you going ter drive coach, Buffalo Bill?" asked Murdock.

"Well, I am, for this run at least, and then I shall put a man on who will go through I think."

"Who is he?"

"Well, that is a secret, but if those mysterious murderers of Death's Canyon get away with the man I put on, they will have something to do, I can pledge them."

"Well, it's gittin' time they was worsted, Bill."

"Yes, and their time will come sooner or later."

The two assistants having hitched up the fresh team, Buffalo Bill mounted the box and drove away on the trail to Fort Famine.

He put his team through rapidly, and it was an hour before sunset when the sentinel at Fort Famine reported the coach returning.

This created great excitement, for it was surmised that Harkaway Harry had been unable to get through, and had turned about, being pursued, for his horses appeared to have been pushed ahead.

Then a great shout arose as Buffalo Bill was recognized as the man on the box.

He swept into the fort, ordered the stablemen to devote themselves to the horses, and have them ready to return in just two hours.

Then a guard was placed over the coach, in which was the body of poor Harkaway Harry, and Buffalo Bill went to headquarters to report to Major Dean.

Care and sorrow had left its impress upon the face of the handsome major, but he received the scout pleasantly, and listened with deepest interest to what he had to say.

"I came back, major, hoping to find the spot where those murderers held up the coach, so I could take their trail from there, leaving the stage at the nearest relay station."

"But I could find no trace of the scene of hold-up, so came on to report to you."

"I shall take the coach back myself to-night, and—"

"And meet the same fate of the others."

"I think not, sir, but I wish to find out by my return to-night, if these murderers are constantly camping on the trail or not."

"How can you?"

"If they hold me up, then they are camping upon the trail, sir."

"If not?"

"It will show that they have a retreat which they go to after the coach has passed and re-passed."

"And if they hold-up the coach they will kill you."

"I am not so sure of that, sir; but I must take the chances, and will, but I have certain ideas of my own which I wish to put to the test."

"Well, Cody, I must let you have your way, and somehow I feel that you bear a charmed life."

"You have promised to rescue my daughter, or discover her fate, and I have confidence, perfect confidence in you."

"I thank you, Major Dean, and I hope to keep my pledge to you before before very long."

CHAPTER XXIII.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

OF course it had become known that Buffalo Bill intended to take the coach back to Fort Rest.

And more, he was to drive the Fatal Trail by night.

Nor was this all.

As though defying death, he was to carry back in the coach the dead body of poor Harkaway Harry.

This looked like tempting Providence to do its worst.

So a large crowd had gathered to see the scout depart as driver of the Fatal Coach, for it was the same coach upon which so many had been killed.

He had had a good supper, Major Dean had given him a handful of fragrant Havanas, and lighting one, he mounted his box in apparent good humor with himself and the world in general.

He sent the team away at a dashing pace and soon the rumble of wheels died away in the distance, while many a head in the fort was ominously shaken, and bets were quietly made among the gamblers that Buffalo Bill was taking his last ride, that he had dared Fate too far.

But the scout held on at a greater speed than that at which the team had before been sent over the trail.

The coach was empty, so light, and there was no baggage.

The wheels had been well greased, and if the horses arrived at the relay distressed they would have ample time to rest before next coach day.

The relay was reached well ahead of the usual time for the run from the fort, and Murdock had the fresh team all ready.

Buffalo Bill had little to say, but Murdock started as a flash of his lantern showed that the body of Harkaway Harry was still inside the coach.

"You will have a new man to drive her through next time, yer say, Buffalo Bill?" called out Murdock, as the scout mounted to the box.

"Yes, I will, and I do not believe the Indian, road-agent or mysterious murderer lives who can kill him, was the response."

With this the whip snapped over the backs of the horses and they were away.

The coach-lamps were lighted, and cast grim, dancing shadows as it rolled along, giving a weird aspect to the flying vehicle.

But Buffalo Bill was a skilled, daring and powerful driver, and he knew the trail well.

The horses felt that they had a master hand upon the reins, and they went accordingly.

The coach came in sight of the Death's Canyon just at midnight, just the hour when graveyards yawn and spooks prowl about, it is said.

Evidently to the surprise of the horses, they were drawn down to a walk to pass through the canyon.

The coach was halted at the lone camp of Buffalo Bill, and dismounting, he got his traps which he had left there.

Then he mounted the box again and drove on at a funeral pace, until he had passed through the Fatal Canyon.

Once more then the horses were sent forward with a rush, until again halted at the creek, when Buffalo Bill dismounted, and hitching the leaders, went off at a run for his horse.

The animal was found as he had left it, except that there was a string about his neck, and a card attached.

Reaching the coach by aid of one of the lights, Buffalo Bill saw on the card as follows:

"Don't dare us too far, Buffalo Bill!"

He said nothing, hitched his horse by the side of the off leader, and again mounting the box went on at the same rapid pace to the next relay.

Here he halted for fresh horses, and the men seemed startled at seeing the scout driving, and the dead body of Harkaway Harry in the coach.

"We feared he'd get it, Bill, and I tell you we is getting skeered the way this killin' goes on," said one of the men at the relay.

Buffalo Bill replied:

"Don't mind it, pard, for it will stop soon, for I put a new man on as driver, and he'll go through, never fear."

"Who is he, Bill?"

"Nobody knows."

"He's an unknown, and he was not born to be killed by cowardly murderers in ambush."

"But I must be off."

Away he went again, and in spite of his halt in Death's Canyon and again for his horse, he was then over an hour ahead of schedule time between Fort Famine and the relay station.

On went the team, urged to a fast trot, and just as dawn broke, Fort Rest came into view three miles away.

The sentinel on the watch-tower reported the coming in of the coach, and a cheer arose for Harkaway Harry, though he should have come in at sunset the day before.

As the coach drew nearer a troop of cavalry was halted at the stockade gates, for they were under orders to go out and see what had become of Harkaway Harry.

Buffalo Bill was recognized on the box when still quite a distance off, and Captain May, in command of the troop, at once spurred toward headquarters to acquaint Colonel Miles with the fact.

"That settles the fate of poor Harkaway Harry, if Cody is bringing the coach in."

"Order him to report at once to me here, Captain May," said the colonel.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TAKING THE COACH THROUGH.

THE soldiers about the stockade gate caught a hasty glimpse of the form of Harkaway Harry, as the coach rolled in, and at once their cheers ceased, for they knew that he was either wounded or dead.

"Ask Colonel Miles to kindly come to the stage-station, please," called out Buffalo Bill as he passed through the gate.

The colonel was there soon after the coach halted and Buffalo Bill said:

"I wish you to see the situation as it is, colonel."

"Harkaway Harry passed through Death's Canyon on the outward run without molestation."

"At noon the next day the coach came in, the horses trotting leisurely along, the reins fast to the lamps, and the body of Harkaway Harry inside, as you see it now."

"That placard I left upon him, and his hands and feet are manacled, while he is tied in an upright position."

"I at once drove back to find the place of hold-up."

"But I was unable to do so, and went on to Fort Famine."

"I then started back by night over the Fatal Trail, got my traps left in Death's Canyon, and met with no molestation."

"I halted to secure my horse, and I found him with that string and card about his neck, showing that he had been visited, and my presence in Death's Canyon was known."

"I now desire, sir, to drive the coach on to Trail End City, and I will find a man who will take the coach through and return, on the run between the forts, and I believe in safety."

"At least, sir, I ask your permission to make the trial."

"You have done well, Buffalo Bill, and you shall have the permission you ask."

"If another driver is killed, however, I shall stop the running of the coaches."

"Now about this poor fellow Harkaway?"

"I would request, sir, that his body be sent in an ambulance to bury alongside the other drivers who have fallen there, for such was his wish."

"It shall be granted."

"And you?"

"After breakfast, sir, I will start upon the run to Trail End City."

"But you need rest."

"I had more rest than I needed, sir, the forty-eight hours I was in Death's Canyon, thank you, colonel."

When it became known that Buffalo Bill had made the run, by night too, through Death's Canyon, and with the dead driver in the coach, and was going to drive the coach on to Trail End City, there were a number anxious to go Eastward with him, who had before feared to take the trip.

So, when the coach started out with Buffalo Bill on the box he had two companions by his side and no less than nine passengers inside the stage, one of whom was an officer's wife, another the wife of the sutler.

The scout-driver sent his horses briskly along, the relay stations were reached ahead of time, and the sun was two hours high when the coach

began the descent of the mountain trail leading to Trail End City in the valley. Every eye in Trail End City was on the watch for the coach.

All felt the deepest interest in knowing the fate of Harkaway Harry, and if he had gone through.

The man who had killed the one who had called him a coward, before his leaving, was not surely inclined to back down when he came to the Fatal Trail of the long run.

There were many who said that he would never go through, others who added that he would never get through alive, while still more declared that Harkaway Harry was just the man to take the chances and win life against death in the deadly game of running the gantlet.

So a great roar went up, surging from The Wayside to the cabins on the hillside, the mines, and from everywhere that men were gathered in their various occupations, or in idling.

Then a general rush was made for The Wayside to meet the coach.

It was coming, sure enough.

And more: there were two passengers on the box with the driver.

Was that driver Harkaway Harry? was the question which everybody asked everybody else.

At last the coach crossed the valley stream and came pulling up the hill leading to The Wayside.

Then all eyes were strained, and a voice rung out:

"It is Buffalo Bill who is driving!"

CHAPTER XXV.

NO TAKERS.

YES, it was Buffalo Bill who held the reins over Harkaway Harry's team.

That all saw as the coach reached the turn in the trail that led up to The Wayside.

Boss Pete Porter was there and he looked very gloomy.

Others too had a serious expression on their faces, and all waited breathlessly for the scout to draw rein before the hotel and to know what it all meant.

A few moments more and Buffalo Bill's foot went down upon the brake, he drew back the team and the stage had halted.

"I came in behind, boss, but it was unavoidable," he said, as he threw the reins upon the backs of the wheel-horses.

"Where is Harkaway Harry?" asked Pete Porter, almost in a whisper.

"In his grave by this time, Pete."

"Killed?"

"Yes."

"At Death's Canyon?"

"In that vicinity."

"How?"

"No one knows, but I found him dead, and in manacles in his coach, and his team trotting on to the fort."

"When?"

"Yesterday at noon."

"He went through all right on the run out?"

"Yes."

"But was killed coming back?"

"Yes."

"Any robbery?"

"Only Harry was robbed, for no passengers would travel, and the miners won't send any treasure along now."

"It has come to that then?"

"Yes."

"Then that means that the stages to the forts must be taken off."

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because you must try still further to push them through."

"No one will drive."

"Try them."

"I suppose I must do so, but it will do no good."

"Give them a chance to refuse."

This conversation had taken place before the crowd, while the passengers were getting supper, preparatory to taking the coach going east, or in the direction they wished to go.

Now Pete Porter called Buffalo Bill into his private room and said:

"See here, Bill, I have new orders from the company."

"Yes."

"I have."

"Well?"

"They say offer as high as three hundred for the run, and if any accept and are killed, then I am to get up a band of seven men to go as an escort for the coach, changing their horses going and coming at Fort Rest."

"Well, Pete, make the offer and see who accepts."

"And I hope there will be some one who will do so, for if the company starts in on this escort business it will have to do it on all of the trails and it will take an army to guard the coaches."

"You are right, so try the offer first."

"And if they do refuse?"

"Then, as I told you once before, Pete, I have a man who will go."

"He must be a dandy if he does."
 "He is willing to take all chances."
 "Is he a driver?"
 "You mean one of the Overland?"
 "Yes."
 "He is not, but he can drive as well as any of your men, and knows the trail the darkest night."
 "Then why not let him go now?"
 "Because you must give your men the chance first."
 "Not a man will go I know."
 "Try them."
 "Then it will be for your man to get the three hundred a run."
 "You are mistaken, for my man will accept no pay."
 "What does that mean, Bill?"
 "That he is not driving for money."
 "What then?"
 "Under orders."
 "Well, whatever his motive let it go, so long as he will drive."
 "Now I must see what I can do among the drivers."

The coaches east, north and south having departed, Pete Porter went to the saloon of The Wayside, where he knew he would find nine-tenths of the community.

He was accompanied by Buffalo Bill, and when they entered there was a general hush fell upon the crowd.

"Pards," called out Pete Porter the Overland Boss, "I have word from the company to get drivers for the Fatal Trail."

"I wish to tell you that poor Chispa Charlie, Ben Bolt, and Harkaway Harry have gone under in their runs, and yet the coaches must go through."

"The offer is four hundred dollars for the run, and it's a big amount of money to make in fifty hours of time."

"Now who bids for the prize—who takes the purse?"

"Don't all speak at once."

But no one spoke; there was a dead silence, for there were no takers.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SEARCHING THE FATAL TRAIL.

FOR some reason Pete Porter seemed glad that there were no takers of his offer.

He urged for awhile, but in a faint way, and at last, when not a soul had spoken, he turned to Buffalo Bill and said:

"You see how it is, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Not a man will go."

"I can hardly blame them, Pete."

"Well, you said that if I found no one to take my offer, you would find me a man who would do so."

"Yes."

"And you will?"

"I will."

"Who is he?"

"That I cannot make known."

"Where is he?"

"He will be at Fort Rest, for you must send your coach through there."

"And then?"

"He will take the coach to Fort Famine and back."

"If he don't get killed."

"If he does, I will have another man to put in his place."

"That's fair, certainly; but should number two go under?"

"Number three will be ready to take his place, and so with number three, four, and as many as are needed, for the Overland coaches shall go through, Pete Porter, I am resolved on that," was Buffalo Bill's determined way of putting it.

This conversation was overheard by many, and it seemed to increase the interest felt in the running of the gantlet of the Death Canyon.

A driver was readily found who consented to drive the coach to Fort Rest, await its return there from Fort Famine and bring it back to Trail End City, for very seldom had a hold-up ever been known to occur upon the first half of the run.

That night Buffalo Bill remained at The Wayside, and was well entertained by Pete Porter, who was the "great man" of Trail End City.

He had brought his saddle and bridle over on the coach, and readily got a horse from Pete Porter to ride back to Fort Rest.

After a hearty breakfast, and followed by a cheer from those who saw him depart, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and rode off on the trail.

He seemed in no hurry, and it was night before he arrived at Fort Rest, he having made quite long halts at the relay stations.

Harkaway Harry had been laid in his grave, by the side of his slain companions, and having seen Colonel Miles for half an hour, Buffalo Bill sought Doctor Brandon at his quarters.

"I came to ask, sir, if there is any hope whatever for Hill's recovery?"

"I fear not the slightest, Cody."

"He is still unconscious then?"

"Wholly so, and steadily sinking."

"With a chance of gaining consciousness, sir?"

"I see none, I am sorry to say."

"I have watched him closely, and been ready to ask the questions you wished me to ask, should his reason return."

"How long do you think he will last, sir?"

"I give him a couple of days only."

Buffalo Bill turned sorrowfully away and went to his quarters.

He retired early, but before dawn was up and in his saddle.

His way lay along the Fatal Trail toward Fort Famine.

He went at a rapid pace until he reached the creek, and then went very slowly.

He eyed one side of the trail only, and with a fixed look that took in everything that came before his vision.

Reaching the hard soil of the canyon he kept his eyes upon the high bluffs upon either side, rising like walls far above his head.

Every crevice was examined upon one side, as before.

Entering the open space every boulder and bush on one side was gone over with the same minute scrutiny.

Then he passed on his way, still, as before, searching the trail, and all upon his right hand.

He had halted at the relay for awhile, the one nearest Fort Rest, and had quite a long talk with the three men there, having dinner with them.

He halted again at Relay Number Four, and as it was late in the afternoon, consented to remain for supper.

Murdock had just come in from a hunt, and had killed plenty of game, so they had a feast of venison steaks, a wild goose, some potatoes roasted, raw onions, bread and coffee.

"Well, Bill, you hain't g'n up yit trying to find the mysterious murderers," said Murdock, as Buffalo Bill started upon his way just at nightfall.

"No, Murdock, not yet," was the reply, and the scout rode on his way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BACK OVER THE TRAIL.

TO the surprise of Murdock and his two comrades, Buffalo Bill arrived at their cabin, on his return, just at dinner-time.

He was made heartily welcome, however, and told them he had been sent back to Fort Rest with dispatches to Major Dean.

After dinner he started on the trail, and this time it was the other side of the road that underwent his closest scrutiny, as the opposite side had been scrutinized.

He rode slowly, as before, and went at the same pace through Death's Canyon.

On the side he was searching there was the newly-made grave of Harkaway Harry.

By his side also lay Ben Bolt and Chispa Charlie, with the other murdered drivers in a long row.

Beyond were the graves of the passengers who had fallen victims to the mysterious assassins of Death's Canyon, and a long list it was.

"Thirty-nine persons lie here—the victims of those unknown assassins of this canyon, and fifteen of them are the drivers of the Overland."

"There indeed lie three heroes, Harkaway Harry the bravest of them all, for he was the last one."

"Peace to their ashes!"

"They are at rest now. If they missed joys that would have come to them in living, by dying they have also missed as many sorrows and sufferings which surely would have been theirs."

"Again I say may they rest in peace; and more—may they be avenged!"

The scout had stood hat in hand by the graves, his head bowed in deepest respect as he mused aloud:

Now he turned and walked on, his horse slowly following him.

Halting and looking back at the group of graves in the canyon, Buffalo Bill raised his hand and cried aloud:

"Yes, may you be avenged, my gallant pards, shall be my daily and nightly prayer!"

The scout's voice rung, his eyes flashed fire as he uttered the words.

Then he threw himself into his saddle, his face assumed its usual expression once more, and he rode slowly on as before, searching one side of the trail.

He went to his old camp and looked about for a trail.

He wished to find some trace of the one who had been to that camp and hung the placard of warning around the neck of his horse.

But trail there was none.

So on he went, and just before sunset rode up to Relay Station Number Three.

There were three men here, one of them, a man by the name of Fred Fox being the overseer of the Relay Stations between Trail End City and Fort Famine, it being his duty to make the ride once a week to see how the stock was cared for and that the men did their duty.

He had been a driver in the Rocky Mountains, but had lost an arm while on his box, and was given the place as overseer of stations.

A tall, handsome man he was, of powerful physique, and a manner as gentle as a woman's.

He carried two revolvers in his belt, both upon his left hip, so as to reach them with his one hand, and also, a knife, and he was a dead shot, and it was said, a dangerous man to arouse in spite of his gentle ways.

"It was said that he was a man of education, though if so he assumed the border dialect in conversation."

His comrades dubbed him "captain," though at times he was called "Fred" and "Foxey."

The Station Number Three was situated in the mouth of a canyon which widened into a valley, where there was fine grazing and water for the horses.

The cliffs of the canyon towered high over the cabin of the stock tenders, and the corral, there being a score of horses in the latter.

"Ho, Foxey, hav'n't been to supper have you, for I'm as hungry as a bear," called out Buffalo Bill as he drew near the canyon.

"Just getting it ready, Bill, and you are more than welcome."

"Any news back on the trail?"

"Nothing, for the major has heard not a word about his daughter, and has about given up all hope of ever seeing her alive again."

"I hope it won't be as bad as that, Bill."

"It looks so, Foxey, I am sorry to say," was Cody's answer.

After enjoying his supper and a pipe he mounted his horse and rode off on the Fort Rest Trail.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WITH THE SETTING OF THE SUN.

BUFFALO BILL rode on toward Fort Rest for a couple of miles, when he halted in the shadow of a huge rock, which hung over the trail like the prow of a mighty vessel.

He gave a low whistle, and it was repeated from above.

He repeated the whistle in three short calls, and at once over the brow of the rock swung a human form, which descended a rope apparently.

Instead, it was a rope-ladder, for the end of it dropped in his trail by the side of the scout's horse.

"I dare not halt now, for I may be followed."

"Here is a note I wrote you this afternoon, and in the dark I scribbled something further as I rode along, and which you may be able to make out."

"The coach will come through to Fort Rest on time, and then it will be for me to act."

"Now I must be off, pard."

There was a silent grasp of the hand, a few muttered words from the man clinging upon his rope-ladder, and Buffalo Bill rode on his way.

Then the man ascended the ladder once more and drew it up after him.

He had hardly done so when a form skulked along the trail following Buffalo Bill.

The man on the cliff peered over, and watching, saw the form returning soon after, but he made no effort to halt him, but let him go on his way.

It was midnight when the scout reached the fort, and seeing a light burning in the cabin where the wounded man Hill was, he made his way there after putting up his horse.

Two scouts were there, and upon a cot lay a form covered with a sheet.

Instantly Buffalo Bill removed his hat, for he need not be told that the scout had passed the portal of eternal rest.

"He died this evening, just at sunset, Bill," said one of the scouts, in a low tone.

"Poor fellow."

"Did he regain consciousness, Bony?"

"Yes, and asked to be placed in the door so that he could see the sun set."

"Anything else?"

"I do not know, for Doctor Brandon was with him."

Buffalo Bill let his hand rest gently upon the head of the dead scout for a moment, as Bony drew back the sheet, and then went away.

He saw a light in the quarters of Surgeon Brandon so went to his room and knocked.

"Come in!"

The surgeon was there, playing cards with three other officers and with a bowl of punch and a box of cigars upon the table before them.

"Ho, Cody, come in!" said the doctor pleasantly, for he was too accustomed to scenes of misery and death not to have already forgotten the scout's death a few hours before.

"Pardon me, doctor, but I did not know you were engaged, and seeing a light in your quarters dropped in."

"You did right."

"Sit down and have a glass of punch and tell me how I can serve you."

"You look tired."

"Yes, really ill," said one of the officers.

"Not sick, are you, Bill?" a second one remarked.

"A punch will make you feel better than any medicines Brandon can give you, Cody," a third officer remarked.

"Yes, Bill, take a treble allowance and catch up with us," added the surgeon.

"Thank you, doctor, one will do, and I believe I really need that as a bracer, for I just came from the cabin where poor Hill lies."

"Yes, poor fellow, I could not save him, try as I might."

"He rallied at the last, asked to be taken to the door to see the sunset, and I gave him a stimulant."

"Then I sat down for a talk with him, for I saw that the change was but the rally before death."

"But when I spoke to him he did not answer, and when I touched his pulse I saw that he was dead."

"His life had gone out just as the sun disappeared beyond the horizon."

"Then he said nothing more, sir?"

"Not a word."

Buffalo Bill sighed and turned away, soon after going to his own quarters.

The next afternoon the scout was buried with military honors, and after the burial Buffalo Bill went to headquarters to see Colonel Miles, just as the sentinel in the watch-tower reported the coach from Trail End City coming into sight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BUFFALO BILL MAKES A REQUEST.

COLONEL MILES had heard of Buffalo Bill's return to the fort early in the morning, but he knew that the chief of scouts would put in an appearance at headquarters in good time.

When he did come, after the burial of Hill the scout, Buffalo Bill said:

"I did not report before, sir, as I did not wish it thought that I had been away upon any mission."

"Sit down, Cody, and tell me of your scouting the past two days."

"But first let me say how deeply I regret Hill's death, and especially, though he had a lucid moment just before life passed away, he did not say one word that he alone could tell, and we so longed to know."

"It was most unfortunate, sir; but with that hope gone, we must depend upon ourselves now altogether."

"Have you made any discovery?"

"Well, sir, I made the completest examination possible of one side of the trail from the creek to the Relay Station Number Four, when I was going, and coming back, on the other side."

"With what result?"

"That I am sure, sir, the murderers never use horses in their going to and from the Death's Canyon."

"Ah! that is something."

"It is a good deal, sir, as it proves that their retreat cannot be very far from the canyon."

"That is so."

"On foot, sir, they can reach the trail at either end of the canyon, but no other way that I can see, for the walls of rock are very high and precipitous, as you know, sir?"

"Yes, nothing could scale them."

"They therefore, doubtless, enter the canyon at one end, lie in ambush, and retreat by the other."

"Well?"

"When I have been in the canyon, sir, at the time the stage has passed, there has been no murder there, if you will remember."

"That is so, Cody."

"This satisfies me, Colonel Miles, that there are spies somewhere along the line that had their eyes on me, knowing I was there, and thus the coach was held up at other points, as when Hill was killed, and Harkaway Harry."

"Very true."

"That I was reported to be in the canyon by spies of those murderers is proven, I think, by the placard that was hung around the neck of my horse, giving me warning not to go too far."

"By Jupiter! you are right, Cody."

"Yes, you are getting down to bed rock in this affair, I am glad to see."

"Now, colonel, if these murderers were many in number, you know that my being in the canyon would never have deterred them from acting there, for they could readily have wiped me out."

"I am not so sure of that, Cody."

"Still, sir, they would not have allowed one man to stand them off, but have ended my career from an ambush, somewhere."

"It would seem so."

"So I think, sir, there cannot be a large force of these murderers, and being afoot, they can readily find retreats, leaving no trail, and perhaps having spies in both forts to post them."

"It looks that way, most certainly."

"But did you go to Fort Famine?"

"I did, sir, and after a talk with Major Dean,

returned on my way at once, for I wished to camp on the trail."

"The poor major is heartbroken about his daughter's unknown fate, I fear."

"He bears up well, sir, and has the hope of yet seeing her, and I have encouraged him in that belief."

"Which you do not yourself believe?"

"Pardon me, sir, but I do, for one was held for a purpose, not to kill, as were also the other two."

"For what purpose?"

"That we have yet to find out, sir."

"But, now, colonel, I have a favor to ask of you?"

"Granted."

"Well, sir, I may seem wrong in acting in a mysterious way, and not now explaining, but I shall make all clear in good time, sir."

"All right, I trust you, so go ahead."

"The coach has just come in, sir."

"So it was reported."

"You hold it to-night, sir, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And send it through by daylight to-morrow?"

"Yes, but I dread the result."

"Not so much as before sir."

"Why not?"

"I have a man to take the coach through, sir, and he will be on hand in the morning when wanted."

"Poor fellow."

"Not yet, sir; but the favor I wish to ask of you is that he must remain unknown."

"Who is he?"

"That is the secret, sir, I must keep from every one, and so I ask that he may wear a mask, and more, colonel, please give me a pass to allow my unknown to go and come at will from and to the fort."

The request of the chief of scouts fairly astounded the colonel, to judge from his looks.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE REQUEST GRANTED.

BUFFALO BILL could not but smile at the look of amazement depicted upon the face of Colonel Miles at his request.

"You wish to send a masked driver out upon the coach, and to have me give him a pass that allows him to enter and leave the fort at will?"

"Yes, sir."

"That is as I understood you, Cody."

"It is as I meant it, sir."

"This is a remarkable request."

"I admit it, sir, and I wish that I could now explain my reasons, but I cannot."

"The coach is to be driven here to the fort by a driver who will not take it further, sir."

"Egad, I cannot blame him."

"Nor do I, sir, with the knowledge he has of the fate of all who have gone before him."

"But I have a man who will take his place here and drive on to Fort Famine."

"He must be a game one."

"He is all of that, sir."

"But there are reasons why he should not be known yet awhile, Colonel Miles, and the air of mystery may help our cause."

"At least I think so, sir."

"He is to go in disguise there, and so remain until he is killed in Death's Canyon by those murderers, or return to the fort?"

"Yes, sir."

"When is he to unmask, unless he is killed?"

"When there is no longer any mystery regarding these murderers of Death's Canyon."

"Doomsday."

"I hope not, sir, and you remember you said I was getting down to bed rock."

"So I did, and I believe you are."

"You granted my request, sir, before you knew what it was."

"So I did, and I will not go back on my word now."

"I thank you, sir."

"But will you answer me a question?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do not do so if it is going to compromise you in this matter of your masked driver, for I'll excuse you if you deem it best not to answer it."

"I will answer it, sir, if I can."

"Well, tell me if this masked driver is one of my officers, one from the fort?"

"He is not, sir."

"Is he from Fort Famine?"

"He is not, sir."

"Well, I will grant the request, Cody."

"Thank you, sir."

"How do you wish the pass written?"

The colonel turned toward his desk and took up a pen.

Then Buffalo Bill said:

"All guards, scouts and sentinels of Fort Rest, and Fort Famine, pass the masked bearer in and out of all military lines in my district, and to lend him any aid he may require at the hands of those under my command."

"A well-worded special order, Cody, for your masked unknown; but it shall go as you dictate," and the colonel signed, sealed and de-

livered it to Buffalo Bill, who thanked him warmly for the document, placing it carefully away in his pocket.

"Do you have hopes, Cody, of seeing your masked driver alive after he leaves the fort?" asked the colonel, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, I have."

"Well I have not, after what has happened."

"I have another favor to ask, colonel."

"What, another?"

"Yes, sir; I would like a leave of absence, sir, for a month."

"What!"

"Buffalo Bill ask for a leave of absence in the face of the enemy?"

"It is not to go far, sir, only to be at liberty to go and come at will, for I do not wish to be hampered by duties in the fort just now."

"It shall be as you wish, Cody, for I am sure you are aiming at dead center in what you are doing now."

"I am trying to do my duty, sir, the work you have set me upon."

"I can believe that without reserve."

"Thank you, sir."

"When do you wish your leave to begin?"

"To-night, sir."

"For one month?"

"Yes, sir."

The colonel turned again to his desk and wrote a special leave of absence for the scout, who took it with an expression of thanks.

"Now you do not wish an escort to go with your new man, Cody?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Suppose he is killed?"

"He must take his chances as the other brave fellows have done, sir, who have driven the Fatal Trail."

"And he has the pluck to do it?"

"He has, sir."

"I wish to make his acquaintance some day."

"I trust I shall have the pleasure of bringing him to meet you, Colonel Miles," was the response of Buffalo Bill, who then took his leave, going to the stage station to see who it was that had brought the coach in from Trail End City.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MASKED DRIVER.

BUFFALO BILL found that the driver who had brought the coach up from Trail End City was Brighton, a man well-known along the Overland stage runs as a brave fellow who could handle the reins to perfection.

"Well, Bill, I'm here, and come through without a mishap, I'm glad to say," said the driver.

"I am glad of it, Brighton, and hope you will have no trouble on your part of the run."

"Who's to take the coach on ter Famine, Bill?"

"I have a man who will be here on time in the morning."

"What did yer say his name were?"

"I didn't say."

"But yer knows?"

"He is an unknown."

"Ah! and maybe he won't do it."

"Well, pard, you will be here at the fort to see whether he does or not, and you will take the coach back to Trail End City when he brings it here from Fort Famine."

"If he does."

"I admit that the chances are against him, but then he is going to try."

"He kin do no more than that, Pard Bill," said Brighton, and with this the two parted, the scout going to his quarters for supper.

Later, after "Lights Out," had rescinded through the fort, Buffalo Bill came out of his quarters and made his way to the stockade gate which was known as "the colonel's gate."

He opened this with a key that he had and passed out, locking it behind him, for no sentinel was kept there.

Out upon the plains he walked for a quarter of a mile, to where there was a cottonwood tree standing alone.

As he approached a man stepped out from its shadow and greeted him.

"I came as you directed, Bill, and I think I have some news for you," he said.

"All right, pard, we'll talk it over when you are safe inside my quarters."

"I have the key of the colonel's private gate in the stockade and we will go in that way."

"But first, for fear of accidents, let me give you this paper of protection which the colonel gave me for you."

"Ah! he knows then—"

"Nothing."

"He does not know who I am?"

"He does not, nor does any one else save myself."

"Good!"

"I am ready."

Buffalo Bill led the way, or rather they walked along together, approaching the stockade at the point where they were not visible in the darkness to the sentinels on either side of the wall.

The scout unlocked the door, the two entered, and relocking it, a couple of heavy bars were put up that secured it more firmly, though the gate so fit into the wall of timber as to hardly be noticed by daylight.

Crossing to the parade-ground Buffalo Bill and his companion skirted along an obscure path and, avoiding several whom they saw, made their way to the other end of the stockade, where in a corner was the scout's quarters, the cabin of Buffalo Bill fronting the barracks of the men and being well located for observing all that went on in the fort.

They reached the cabin without being halted, and entering it Buffalo Bill struck a match and lighted a candle.

By this light it was seen that the stranger wore a mask which completely covered his face from view.

He was a large man, erect, with the bearing of a soldier, wore gauntlet gloves, top boots and a complete suit of buckskin.

A silk handkerchief concealed his neck, so that there was not a particle of his skin visible to show whether his complexion was that of a pale-face or Indian, and his head was sheltered by a hood sombrero.

Such in appearance was the unknown man whom Buffalo Bill had gotten to drive the deadly trail that led through Death's Canyon.

He was to be known only as the Masked Driver of the Fatal Trail, and who he was no one could guess from looking at him.

"All is ready for you to take the coach out to-morrow, pard," said the scout.

"And I am ready to do so," was the calm reply, and the two sat down to have supper together, after which they sought their blankets for a good night's rest, as though they both fully recognized what was before them upon the morrow.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE UNKNOWN TAKES THE REINS.

THE stage-horn calling, as was the custom, for the passengers to get ready for the start, brought many to the station to see the coach go on its way.

The horn was blown half an hour before starting time, and a large crowd of soldiers, scouts and hangers-on were gathering there, impelled by curiosity to see who the daring driver was that would thus go to certain death, as all believed.

Officers were there, and their wives and children, and to the surprise of many, Colonel Miles came sauntering down to the scene, accompanied by Captain May and several of his staff.

The colonel also felt a desire to have a look at this bold driver who was unknown to him, and who he well knew would be masked, through some strange whim of his own and Buffalo Bill's.

The horses were hitched up, the stable-boys stood at their heads, and the agent was at his post, but no driver had yet appeared.

There were no passengers, for not a soul would risk the drive through Death's Canyon after all that had happened.

The stage boss looked at his watch and then glanced over the crowd, when suddenly there was heard a cry:

"Here he comes!"

Then, coming from the direction of the scout's quarters, was seen a tall form making for the stage-station.

Every eye was upon him; and, as he came leisurely along he cracked a very handsome coach whip which he carried in a manner that showed how well he knew how to handle one.

He was dressed in a suit of black corduroy, top-boots, a sombrero, wore gauntlet gloves, and had a silk handkerchief about his neck, while, strangest of all, his face was completely hidden under a sable mask.

This was a surprise to the crowd, and a murmur ran among them as to what it meant, so strange a proceeding as to be masked.

As he came up to the station a silence fell upon all. He politely saluted the colonel, who, returning the salute, eyed the masked face curiously and intently.

"You are the stage boss, sir, I believe?" he said, in a low voice.

"I am, sir."

"I was told by Buffalo Bill to report to you, to take the coach out on the run to Fort Famine."

"It is just five minutes to starting time," and he took out a handsome gold watch and glanced at the dial.

"Yes, Buffalo Bill told me he would have a man here on time to take out the coach."

"You is that man?"

"I am, sir."

"What is your name?"

"My name has nothing to do with my driving, sir, so put me down as the Masked Driver of the Fatal Trail, please."

"All right; and you know what you have to face?"

"I have been told all, sir, by Mr. Cody."

"There is not one chance in ten that you get through alive."

"I thought the odds were much greater

against me—say one in a thousand," was the cool reply.

"Well, you know what you are doing, I suppose, and, as I want no man to go blindfolded to death, I am glad to know you understand the peril of the drive."

"I shall take all chances, sir, of the Fatal Trail," was the prompt and decisive reply of Buffalo Bill's mysterious messenger.

"You had better leave your watch and valuables here."

"No, for they will be of no use to me if I lose my life. I risk death and robbery together on this venture."

"You are a cool one and no mistake; but, where is Cody?"

"He was granted a leave of absence, I believe."

"Well, pard, you is ther durndest fool I ever struck ter drive ther trail o' Death's Canyon, so I says good-by ter yer," and Brighton, the driver, who had listened to all that had passed, stepped forward and confronted the masked driver.

The unknown took the extended hand, and turning to the stage boss, said:

"Any orders, sir?"

"Not any, except not to get killed."

"Time is up, then, so I'll be off."

He turned, leaped lightly up to the box, gathered up his reins, and said pleasantly:

"Let them go, boys!"

The stablemen sprang back from the heads of the horses, and with a crack of his whip, the Masked Driver started his team on the run of the Fatal Trail.

Every eye was upon him, and as he wheeled his team sharply around, and took the road for the main gate of the stockade, they saw that he handled the reins with masterly skill.

Then, loud and long rung out a cheer for the bold man who dared to face the danger of Death's Canyon, while Colonel Miles, as he walked back toward his quarters, sent an order to summon Buffalo Bill to come to him at once.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN A QUANDARY.

THE orderly returned to headquarters, from going to the scout's quarters, to report that Buffalo Bill had gone away before dawn, it was said by one, on a scout, by another, that he had a leave of absence.

"Then he is not in the fort, orderly?"

"No, sir."

"Go and find out at what time Buffalo Bill passed the sentinel at the stockade gate, and if he was alone?"

"Yes, sir," and the orderly hastened away.

In a short while he returned, with the information that Buffalo Bill had passed out of the main stockade gate half an hour before dawn, riling one horse and leading another, the latter carrying a pack.

The orderly departing Colonel Miles turned to Captain May and said:

"I told you the favor Buffalo Bill asked of me, captain?"

"Yes, sir, to allow his driver to go masked."

"That was it, and for a leave of absence for himself."

"Yes, sir."

"Now I gave him the key to what is known as my gate in the stockade wall, and I verily believe he rode out of the fort, had some comrade awaiting him outside, and coming back through the little gate went to his quarters and rigged up as the Masked Driver."

"You think so, sir?"

"I do."

"Why so, may I ask, colonel?"

"Well, the Masked Driver came from Cody's cabin."

"True, sir."

"He was about Cody's height and build."

"Very nearly, sir, I should think."

"And he was masked, wore gauntlet gloves, had even his neck concealed with that silk handkerchief he wore, and it looked very much to me as though he had his long hair done up under his sombrero."

"It might be so, colonel; but then what motive would Cody have for going in a masquerading costume?"

"He well knew that I would not allow him to drive that coach."

"That is so, sir."

"He was determined to go through the Death's Canyon on the coach and he is not one to stop at any danger to gain his ends, and I really believe that he was masqueraded just to carry his point and discover how it is all there people have been massacred, believing that he could escape."

"Then I fear, sir, that he has made a sad mistake," said Captain May.

"I fear so, yet I sincerely trust not, for his loss would be irparable, while, with Buffalo Bill dead our stay here would be attended with much more danger than it is."

"He knows every path of this country, understands the Indian nature as few other men do, and is invaluable as a scout, colonel."

"He is all of that; but, outside of selfish motives, I would deeply regret his loss, for he is a splendid fellow."

"Shall I take a force and go after the coach, sir, for by hard riding I can overtake it?"

"No, as it might break in upon some plan he has, and I am confident that he has sifted this murder mystery deeper than he admits even to me."

"He is not alone either, I am convinced, so we might undo what he has planned by sending aid to protect him."

"That is very true, sir, and he has gone into solving this strange case with both eyes open I feel sure."

"Some of his men are doubtless with him."

"Ah! there is at present not a scout out of the fort just now, unless he has gone with Cody, so muster the men in buckskin, Captain May, and find out just who is missing."

The captain hastened away to obey, and in an hour's time returned to headquarters.

Cody has gone on leave, sir, the men said, to visit some one at Trail End City, or Fort Famine, they were not sure which, and he left in command C. B. Owens, whom we know best as Buckskin Charlie.*

"He left his orders for Buckskin Charlie to start out half the scouts to-day at noon on a run toward the Indian country, holding the balance here for a call, what he did not say, should they be quickly needed."

"And what scouts are out, captain?"

"Cody is the only one of his band now away from the fort, so Buckskin Charlie tells me, sir."

"Then who is it that Cody has aiding him, for he certainly is not alone on the trail?"

That question Captain May found it impossible to answer, for he too was in a quandary as to who it could be that was with Buffalo Bill on the hunt for the mysterious murderers.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MASKED DRIVER'S FIRST RUN.

THE Masked Driver went out of the fort in a way that showed he understood how to handle the reins over the backs of six horses in masterly style.

He saluted the officer of the day as he went through the gate, and that officer had the guard stand at a "present" to him, an honor which he said any man deserved who was taking the chances against death which the Masked Driver was doing.

On sped the coach, and it looked as though the Masked Driver knew the trail perfectly.

He halted to water his team just where it was always done, and blew the stage-horn before he came in sight of the relay station, for the men to be ready to change horses.

As he drove up before the cabin he was met by Fred Fox and his three assistants, who had the fresh horses ready to hitch in.

It was evident that Fred Fox was surprised, as also were his men, for he gazed with something akin to awe upon the masked face of the driver, who saluted him politely, but in silence.

"Say, pard, who be yer?" asked Foxey.

"I am the Masked Driver of Death's Canyon," was the calm response, in a deep voice.

"Does yer expect ter git through?"

"I am going through."

"Yer think so?"

"I know it."

"Many has thought thet same, and they is in the'r graves."

"They trusted those they deemed their friends, perhaps."

"But I trust no man."

"Whew! yet yer hides yer face."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It is a fancy of mine to do so."

"Well, I only hopes ye'll git through."

"Suppose you accompany me, Foxey, and see for yourself that I do."

"Not much, fer I don't run ag'in' sart'in death."

"Well, I take chances, and the man who draws trigger on me will never live to know whether his aim was good or bad."

"What does yer mean?"

"Oh, nothing, only more than two can play at the game of hide and seek, you know."

"Pard, yer is a queer one, and I hopes yer git through, for I likes yer pluck; but I doubt it."

"I'll bet you a couple of hundred to one that I go through, Foxey, and that if there is a death in the canyon on my runs I won't be the man who is buried."

"Come, put up your money."

But Foxey did not respond, but said:

"I likes yer narve, but I hain't goin' ter bet ag'in' a brave man's life."

"All right, as you please, Foxey."

"I sees that yer knows me?"

"Oh, yes, Captain Fred Fox, alias Foxey, I know you, and also your three pards there, Bradley, Bloden and Knuckles."

"Now yer does, for a fact; but we don't catch on ter who you is."

* A scout who has won fame upon the frontier as an Indian-fighter, and the hero of many a daring adventure.
THE AUTHOR.

"Nor does any one else, for I drive this Death Trail masked, and the man who pulls trigger on me does not know who it is he is killing, or what will be the result of his shot, for I am no fool, Foxey, to set myself up on this box as a target without being able to hit back."

The four men looked at each other in amazement, for here was a character.

Of all the drivers they had seen go by the relay, they had never found one like this man, and his masked face and enigmatical words impressed them with a certain awe, for Foxey expressed the opinion of all when he said:

"See here, pard, I'm betting your way now, for you is jist ther man ter go through."

"That is my intention, and woe be to the one who bars my way," was the calm reply of the Masked Driver, spoken in his deep, sonorous voice.

The fresh team having been hitched in, refusing a glass of grog offered him, the Masked Driver drove on his way, Knuckles remarking:

"See here, pards, that coach was closed up tight, but I seen a man's eye looking out thet leetle glass, on ther rear seat."

"Yas, he intends a trap, he does," said Foxey, and all stood gazing after the coach and wondering who the Masked Driver could be.

On drove the Masked Driver along the trail, and entering the Death's Canyon he drew his horses down to a walk, placed his repeating-rifle across his knees and loosened his revolvers in their holsters.

He passed the graves, the scene of the hold-ups, and no shot came, no one appeared to molest him.

Once through the canyon he passed on to the next relay station, blowing the stage-horn as before, long ere he came in sight of the cabin, which showed a knowledge of where it was situated, at least.

When the coach drove up before Relay Number Four, Murdock and his men were there to greet the driver, and started when they beheld the large form and masked face of the one who had dared Death's Canyon.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FROM RELAY FOUR TO FORT FAMINE.

MURDOCK and his men were equally as taken aback by the appearance of the Masked Driver, as were those at Relay Number Three.

He halted, saluted politely and waited for them to speak.

"Waal, pard, yer has got us foul," said Murdock.

"In what way?" came the answer, in the deep voice of the unknown driver.

"We don't know yer."

"No man does."

"Yer is drivin' ther death coach, I sees."

"Oh, yes."

"Over ther Fatal Trail, too?"

"Why not?"

"And come through Death's Canyon O. K.?"

"Why should I not?"

"Yer must be a stranger in these parts ter say that."

"Well, I know that the Fatal Trail has cost the life of many a brave driver of the Overland and innocent man, yes, and woman; but, it is time it was stopped, this murdering business."

"So say we all of us; but how is it goin' ter be did?"

"I have just come through, and to-morrow I go back, so watch the result on those who draw trigger on me, for I know what I am about, as you will see, pards."

"Yer talks game; but yer don't show yer face."

"If my face is masked I offer my body as a target, however, for any murderer who wishes to take the chances of killing me," said the Masked Driver.

"Yer is cut an' dried for 'em, then?"

"Let them fire at me and then remember what I have said, for, as I remarked before, I am no fool."

"Waal, pard, luck to yer, and it will be a great day when yer breaks up this murder business on ther trails."

"Will yer hev a leetle dinner?"

"No, thank you, for I carry my lunch with me."

"Won't a drop o' liquor do yer good?"

"No, thanks, I never drink," was the response.

The horses being hitched in, the Masked Driver sent them off with a crack of his whip, while Murdock and his men gave him a cheer.

It was an hour before sunset when the sentinel on the watch-tower at Fort Famine reported the stage coming in. Who was the driver that dared make the run was the question upon every lip.

On came the coach at a rapid pace, and all the fort had gathered to receive it.

As it drove into the stockade walls such a cheer as greeted the driver was never heard before in Fort Famine.

He had run the Death Gantlet in safety.

The coach was closed, so there could not be any passengers.

The driver had come through alone.

And the driver was masked.

He threw the reins down upon the backs of the wheelers, dismounted, and raising his sombrero, made his way toward the quarters of Major Dean.

That officer had seen the coach come in, and had been told by his orderly that the driver was masked.

He was anxiously pacing the floor of his quarters and waiting to understand what it meant.

Tall, erect, with a soldierly step and fine bearing, the Masked Driver walked to headquarters.

As the orderly ushered him across the threshold he came face to face with Major Dean, whose face wore a look of settled sadness now.

"Pardon me, Major Dean, if I do not unmask or uncover my head in your presence, but Colonel Miles gave me permission to drive the Fatal Trail masked, for under such conditions only do I make the run."

"You are excusable, sir; but I suppose Colonel Miles knows who you are?"

"He does not, sir."

"Ah!"

"Then you are unknown wholly?"

"Except to Buffalo Bill."

"Then that is all-sufficient, sir."

"I am glad to meet you, driver, and to congratulate you upon having come through, this way at least, in safety."

"Thank you, sir."

"Were you not fired upon?"

"No, sir."

"Yet the back run remains."

"I feel that I shall go through in safety, sir."

"Heaven grant it; but, if not presuming, may I ask why you go masked?"

"I cannot answer your question now, sir."

"Should I be killed it will be made known, and when the work is accomplished that urges me to my present course, you will know all, Major Dean."

"And the work you expect to accomplish, may I ask?"

"To you, sir, in confidence, I will say that it is the rescue of your daughter, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier, from the mysterious murderers, and their complete punishment for their evil deeds."

"Ha! do you know that my child is not dead?" eagerly asked Major Dean.

"I feel certain, sir, that she is alive and well," was the reassuring response, which brought from Major Dean a most fervent:

"Thank God!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE START ON THE RETURN.

THE words of the Masked Driver of the Fatal Trail gave great hope to Major Dean, that he knew more than he cared to then admit, regarding his daughter and her two fellow captives.

He wrung the hand of the driver warmly and said:

"I will send an escort back with you to-morrow, my friend, for you must not come to harm."

"No, thank you, sir, that must not be, for I can go alone only; an escort would spoil all."

"But—"

"I must be firm in this request, Major Dean, and beg that you will send no one after me when I have gone, for, as I have said, it would interfere with my plans, and I believe I see my way clear now to accomplish the purpose in view."

"But how can you do so alone?"

"I cannot answer, sir, more than I have done."

"Well, I have confidence in you, in spite of your hiding your face, and if I can serve you in any way command me."

"I will gladly do so, sir."

"Before going to-morrow I shall report to you, sir, for any orders you may have."

"But have you quarters?"

"Yes, sir, I shall occupy the cabin in the scouts' camp which Buffalo Bill has as his quarters when here, and as I am masked and must eat alone, I have provisions and will do my own cooking, thank you, sir."

Then the Masked Driver went to the cabin spoken of, and of which he had the key, for Buffalo Bill frequently had to remain for days at Fort Famine, and so kept his quarters there, with a cot and cooking utensils.

The soldiers and others at Fort Famine regarded the unknown man curiously, and with something akin to awe.

"Who is he?"

That was the all-pervading question asked, with no one to give a satisfactory solution.

The officers seemed surprised that the major did not know, and the ladies in the fort had their curiosity excited to an almost alarming extent.

They felt sure that their husbands, fathers, brothers or lovers, among the officers, as the case might be, knew, but would not tell, and so gossip ran riot over the fort, and many a

gallant soldier was berated by some fair one for keeping from her a "state secret."

The Masked Driver had been invited to half-a dozen messes, but declined all invitations, and admiring the pluck of the man in taking the reins after the fatalities he knew of to all drivers, the bachelor club of officers sent him in a splendid supper and a bottle of wine with their compliments.

It was early when the light went out in the driver's lone cabin, and yet others remained up until late discussing him.

An early breakfast was furnished the Masked Driver from the table of the bachelors' mess, and after eating it he made his way to headquarters to report to Major Dean.

That officer received him warmly and said:

"Well, my friend, you see that the whole fort is up to see you off on your perilous drive, and many a prayer will be sent after you for your safety."

"I feel honored, Major Dean, and only trust that I may render the service I hope to," and bidding the major good-by, though not removing his gauntlet glove to do so, the Masked Driver left headquarters and went to where his coach stood ready awaiting him.

The company had an agent at the fort, it being the terminus, and he said to the Masked Driver:

"If you go back as safely as you came, I will begin to have hope of no more trouble on this end of the line."

"I hope I may, sir; but are there no passengers to go?"

"No indeed, for all are frightened off, as you can understand."

"No treasure, or Express matter?"

"Nothing more than the mails, for no one will trust anything of value now."

"Is all ready then, sir, for the start?"

"Yes, go when you will, for the time is just about up."

The Masked Driver mounted to the box, and a cheer was given him.

As the coach moved off a great shout arose, and when it passed through the outer gate the soldiers there gave him a grand send-off.

The driver bowed his acknowledgment of the cheers upon either side of him, settled himself well in his seat and sent his team ahead for the run back to Fort Rest, or—the grave.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FACING THE DEATH GANTLET.

THE Masked Driver drove back at an ordinary pace, as though not anxious to push his horses too hard, and arrived in sight of the first relay corral on the usual time.

Murdock, Sykes and Giant George, the three stock-tenders, were there when he drove up, and the two latter had the fresh horses all ready in place for the change.

"Well, pard, I guess they made much of you for going through O. K., didn't they?" asked Murdock.

"They seemed glad to see me go through without losing my life; but those who are posted understand that I will not be molested, or if I am, it will end, right there and for good, outlawry on this trail."

"You don't say so!"

"Now, not wishing you any harm, I could almost want ther murderers ter make a break just, so as ter end it all."

"So do I," was the cool response.

"In fact I am willing to be sacrificed, just to have it happen that way."

Murdock and his men looked at the Masked Driver with increased admiration, mingled with awe.

There was that about the man that impressed them greatly.

Again refusing lunch and a drink, the driver went on his way, and when drawing near the Death's Canyon brought his horses down, as before, to a walk.

He reached the open space, where the graves were, with his revolvers ready and his rifle across his knees, and cocked.

He even halted at the place of hold-up, and looked searchingly about him.

But not a sound was heard, not a leaf moved, and all was as quiet as those in the graves near by.

So on he went once more, yet still keeping on his guard, and drove up to Station Number Three slightly ahead of time.

Foxey and his men gave a wild cheer when they saw him coming, and the former cried, triumphantly:

"Pard, yer has done it!"

"Yer has run ther Fatal Trail, yer has faced ther Death Gantlet and come out all right!"

"You is a dandy from 'Wayback, pard."

"I have not yet reached the end of my trail, Foxey, for there are many miles to travel yet; but I'll be ready for whoever holds me up."

"Yer hain't got no passengers, has yer?"

"Not one."

"What makes yer keep ther old hearse closed up so tight?"

"Why leave it open when there is nobody aboard?"

"Maybe you has a treasure inside thet don't need air?"

"Maybe I have, pard, and I only wish some curious road-agent would make a search for it."

"I guess they'd be surprised, eh?"

"They might, if they lived long enough to know what the surprise was."

Foxy stepped several paces further off from the coach, as though fearful that it had been turned into an infernal machine.

If the driver observed his action he made no comment, but started once more on the trail.

He sent his team along at an easy pace, and yet kept his eyes constantly on the alert for any danger.

He was not to be caught napping, and was ready for any emergency.

It was yet some time before sunset when the coach came over the ridge which brought the driver in sight of Fort Rest.

There was a plain, broken here and there by ridges and timber, to cross before reaching the fort, but the Masked Driver saw that the coach had been discovered at the fort and that its coming was creating a sensation.

As it drew near, the stockade walls were lined with soldiers, flags were run up on the staffs before the officers' cabins, and the guard was drawn up to receive the daring man who had been recognized as the Masked Driver.

The officer of the day had ascended to the watch tower, and leveling his glass had called out to the sergeant of the guard:

"Sergeant, report at once to Colonel Miles that the man on the box is the Masked Driver!"

A yell of delight broke forth at this news, and descending from the tower the officer of the day arranged a reception for the brave fellow.

The notes of the stage-horn rung out merrily as the coach neared the gate, and soon after into the stockade dashed the six horses, held well in hand by the Masked Driver.

He saluted at the "Present arms" given him, and the cheers that followed, while, as he approached the stage station the fort band struck up the air:

"See, the Conquering Hero Comes!"

It certainly was a grand reception for the unknown man, and he felt it, as he glanced over the sea of faces, of soldiers, scouts, women and children.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE COLONEL'S SUSPICION.

DISMOUNTING from his box the Masked Driver found it hard to avoid the crowd about him, so said:

"I have to report, sir, that I made the run in safety, not having been molested in the slightest degree, so that the mails are intact."

The stage boss grasped the hand of the speaker and wrung it hard, while he responded:

"You have done that which no other man could do, and I have faith that you were not born to be shot on the box of an Overland stage."

"I trust not, sir."

"But now I must report to Colonel Miles, for whom I have dispatches."

Way was made for him through the crowd, and he walked with erect manner and dignified mien on to headquarters, bowing at the reception everywhere given him.

The colonel met him in a very cordial manner and said:

"Well, my Masked Unknown, it seems that the mysterious murderers did not take you for their game?"

"At least not this time, sir, for I saw no one to molest me."

"This is remarkable; but will you try it again?"

"Oh, yes, sir, for I am on the Fatal Trail to stay until the mysterious murderers go under, or I do."

"I congratulate you upon being a man of very remarkable nerve, sir."

"You have dispatches for me, have you?"

The Masked Driver handed them over and saluting, turned to leave when the colonel said:

"You saw no one in Death's Canyon?"

"No, sir."

"Did you dash through?"

"On the contrary, sir, I went through at a walk, in fact halted coming back for several minutes."

"There was no one there, sir, or, if so, they remained in ambush and did not show up."

"I suppose you had a reception at Fort Famine?"

"I was treated most generously, sir."

"And the major, what has he to say about the mystery still hanging over his daughter?"

"He suffers much, sir; but I gave him hope that all would yet be well."

"You gave him hope?"

"I did, sir."

"Upon what grounds, my friend of the mask?"

"I am not at liberty to state, sir, but I believe that his daughter is alive and safe."

"More mystery; but go ahead and work out the solution in your own way."

"Thank you, sir."

"Do you know that I have a suspicion that I know you, my mysterious Unknown?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I do."

"Who do you think I am, sir?"

"Why, no more nor less than William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill."

A light laugh came from beneath the thick, black mask, and then followed the rejoinder:

"You are wrong, sir."

"In love and war all things are fair, it is said, so perhaps you consider it so to deny my charge; but still I believe you to be Buffalo Bill, and for that very reason I have the more confidence in you."

"Buffalo Bill is well worthy of your confidence, sir; but I am not the one you think I am."

"I will report, sir, in time to take the coach out again, for Driver Brighton takes it on the run to Trail End City, and back to the fort."

"So I understand; but you will remain in the fort of course?"

"Your pass, sir, gives me the right to go and come at will, so I shall avail myself of it, having your kind permission."

"All right, the pass will protect you," answered the colonel, and as the Masked Driver left the room he mused to himself:

"Now is that man Buffalo Bill, or is he not?"

"I thought so, and I do not think so—in fact, I do not know."

"Well, I must bide my time to see this riddle solved."

Straight to the quarters of Buffalo Bill went the Masked Driver, in the gathering gloom, for night was coming on.

A light soon after shone from one of the windows, but the shutters were quickly closed and those who caught a glimpse of the driver as he snatched them, saw that he still wore his black mask.

In every officer's home, at the bachelor officers' mess, at headquarters, in the soldiers' barracks and in the camp of the scouts, cowboys and others attached to the fort, that night the only subject of conversation was the safe run of the remarkable man who had driven off on the coach with a mask shielding his face from view.

What it meant no one knew, and yet he had gone through and back again without losing his life.

Would he be as fortunate the next time? was the universal query.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BUFFALO BILL'S DOUBLE.

THE fort had sunk into quiet, the band had ceased playing, and the bugle had sounded "taps," when a tall form glided among the trees toward the quarters of Colonel Miles, and a few moments after pre-ented himself before the sentinel stationed there.

As chief of scouts the sentinel saluted Buffalo Bill, whom he recognized, and the orderly took in his name to Colonel Miles, who said curtly:

"Admit him."

"Well, Cody, this time you come as yourself, I see?" said the colonel.

"Yes, colonel, as Buffalo Bill."

"See here, Cody, what does this masquerading of yours mean?"

"I do not understand, sir, to what you refer."

"I believe you to be the Masked Driver, that is what I mean."

"You are mistaken, Colonel Miles; but now that I understand that you mistake me for the Masked Driver of Death's Canyon, let me remind you that I told you that I would secure a man to drive the trail, if the last volunteer, Harkaway Harry, was killed, and that I could not now explain any mystery attached to him?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I received a pass for him from you, sir, and leave of absence for myself, and he has driven the trail to Fort Famine and back in safety."

"I know that he has, and I give him credit for it, or you."

"He deserves the credit, sir, for he took all chances."

"I cannot explain the situation as it stands, for I am under pledge not to do so; but I confess that I asked for leave, to work out this mystery, and bring to punishment the guilty murderers of Death's Canyon."

"I can only do so with your full confidence in me, and in the Masked Driver, and the fact that he passed through Death's Canyon twice in safety, is proof that we have started on the right trail to gain our ends."

"You have, Cody, and you shall have my full confidence in you, my aid in all that you wish to do."

"Thank you, sir."

"I am sorry I cannot fully explain to you now just what is being done; I cannot remove the mask from the driver's face, so that you may understand fully, but I am, as I said, under a pledge."

"Go about matters in your own way, Cody, and if I suspect you it is only of being the Masked Driver."

Buffalo Bill laughed and replied:

"I came into the fort to-night, sir, to ask for an officer, four soldiers and a scout, and to have them leave in a way that it will not be known that they go."

"All right, when do you want them?"

"The night before the coach goes out on its next run, sir."

"Very well."

"They can leave by your gate in the stockade, and I will be outside to guide them to a retreat."

"I have selected Buckskin Charlie as the scout, sir, and may I ask for Lieutenant Manning Moore as the officer, with four soldiers whom he may select?"

"Yes, and both Lieutenant Moore and Buckskin Charlie are the very men, I take it, you need, utterly fearless, intelligent, cautious and capable of enduring any hardships, and willingly in the discharge of duty."

"They are, sir, and I would like Lieutenant Moore to select just such men among the soldiers, for there will be danger and hardship for them to face."

"I will send for Lieutenant Moore in the morning and tell him what you wish."

"And that not a whisper must get out, sir, of his going."

"I will impress that upon him."

"And kindly send for Buckskin Charlie also, sir, for I do not wish to be seen in the fort, and must ask you to so state to your sentinel and orderly."

"You are going out then to-night?"

"Yes, sir, by your gate, which you gave me the key of."

"I came in that way to-night."

The colonel smiled, but said:

"Where is your double?"

"Who is that, sir?"

"Your shadow, or shadower, the Masked Driver?"

"He left the fort, sir, a short while ago, for he has his pass, you know, sir, and I met him outside."

"Well, Cody, I will instruct the orderly, and the sentinel to say nothing of your coming to my quarters to-night."

"Now tell me if there is anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, sir, I thank you, more than to detail Lieutenant Moore and Buckskin Charlie, with the four soldiers for the special work I need them for."

"I will attend to it in the morning early."

Then Buffalo Bill arose and took his leave of the colonel, who muttered:

"Well, if that Masked Driver is not Buffalo Bill, then he is his double, or his shadow."

CHAPTER XL.

THE TWO PARDS.

WHEN Buffalo Bill left the quarters of Colonel Miles, he glided among the trees to a clump of heavy timber in the rear of the stockade, and which was used as a park by the officers and their families.

It was here that the colonel's gate in the stockade was located and, fitting the key in the lock the scout removed the bars and went outside.

A man stood close against the stockade wall apparently awaiting him, and Buffalo Bill asked in a low tone:

"Have you the lariat, pard?"

"Yes, here it is."

The scout took the lariat, re-entered the gate, locked it, replaced the heavy bars in position that made it more secure, and then threw the end of the lasso around the limb of a tree near.

Taking the end he climbed up the stockade wall, which at that point was twenty feet in height, and then lowered himself to the ground on the outside.

Hauling on one end of the lariat he drew it over after him remarking:

"Now, pard, we can go; but it would never have done to leave that gate unlocked."

"No, for though no danger might happen from going so, still, if there did it would fall upon you, Bill."

"Sure," and the scout led the way over the plain surrounding the fort.

The sentinels at the corners of the stockade did not see them, and really there was no need of a guard near the gate, as the wall was built upon the side of a hill, and was all of twenty-five feet in height on the outside and of heavy timber, cut square and planted firmly in the ground.

The two pards moved rapidly along over the plain, reached the ridge and descended into the valley beyond, which they continued along for several miles at a brisk walk.

At length they turned short off to the right, up a ravine, and this led them to a canyon, which they passed through to a range of mountains, which they ascended to the summit.

Here was a plateau, heavily timbered, with a soft carpet of grass, immense boulders here and there, and a tiny rivulet falling over a precipice.

In among the rocks was a camp, a small tent being there, a couple of saddles and bridles hanging upon trees near, a pack-saddle, and be-

yard, on a grassy plot, were three horses staked out, and feeding.

Before the tent lay two large, ferocious-looking dogs; but they were chained to a tree, and seemingly muzzled, so that they could not open their mouths to bark.

They greeted the visitors by wagging their tails and showing delight at their coming.

Buffalo Bill scraped some live coals of fire out of the ashes, threw upon them some wood, and soon had a blaze, the light of which was shut out by the rocks about the camp and the heavy timber.

The flaring up of the fire revealed the fact that the companion of Buffalo Bill was the Masked Driver of the Death's Canyon, for he still wore his black mask and his gauntlet gloves.

While the scout set to work to get supper, the Masked Driver led the three horses to the little pool of water to drink.

Then he staked them out securely in a fresh grazing-ground, gathered some wood and returned to the camp.

The scout was not long in getting supper, and the two sat down and appeared to enjoy the meal immensely, the dogs being unmuzzled and given their share, also.

After supper the two pards talked together for awhile, and then went to their blankets in the little tent, leaving the dogs to watch the camp, though they did not appear to dread any harm befalling them.

The next morning they arose early, got breakfast, changed the grazing-ground of their horses, and then each one taking a dog with him, started off down the mountain-side upon a separate trail.

What this secret camp of Buffalo Bill and his masked pard meant the reader will learn in good time.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE STORY TOLD AT TRAIL END CITY.

WHEN it was the hour for the starting of the stage the next morning, on its run to Trail End City, a large crowd had assembled to see it off, for it was supposed by many that the Masked Driver was to be on the box.

But Brighton, the driver who had brought it in from Trail End City appeared, and reported ready for duty, while the Masked Driver was nowhere to be seen.

It was a great disappointment to all, and Driver Brighton saw, as he mounted his box and drove away, that all in the fort were hero-worshippers, and he regretted, now that the Masked Driver had gone through to Fort Famine and back in safety, that he had not made the run himself and gotten the glory of it.

He drove on over the trail where he looked for no danger, unless from solitary road-agent, who, wanting money, might hold him up, and at each of the relay stations between the fort and Trail End City, had his story to tell of the Masked Driver, who had taken the coach twice through the Death's Canyon.

"Who is he, Pard Brighton?" was anxiously asked him by the stock-tenders.

But this question he could not answer, more than to say:

"Many believes it is Buffalo Bill, playing some game he don't want to be known in, and if it is, I guesses ther colonel knows."

"Of course he does, or ther scout wouldn't be allowed ter go masquerading on top of a Overland coach," said one.

"Well, he went through, that is sart'in, and ef he does it ag'in, then I are willing ter make ther run."

"Yer think he'll git thar next time Brighton?"

"I don't know, for Buffalo Bill were born under a lucky star, and with a gold sugar spoon in his mouth."

"Yas, he were born fer luck, or he'd have been kilt afore he reached his teens, and don't you forgit it, pards."

"Waal, it's a long lane thet has no turn in it, and some day Buffalo Bill's luck will change and he'll die by a bullet like any other man," said one.

Driving on more rapidly, after leaving the last relay corral, Brighton came in sight of Trail End City before nightfall.

This time the coach was coming in on the regular time, not being late, and when the people of Trail End City heard the stage horn they flocked to The Wayside to welcome it.

Pete Porter was there and heartily called out for a cheer for Brighton, which was given with a will, and then he was asked:

"Well, Pard Brighton, did the coach go through to Fort Famine this time?"

"It did, boss."

"Did you drive?"

"I did not," was the somewhat sullen response, for Brighton could not but see what a chance he had missed to become a great hero.

"Who did?"

"Buffalo Bill's man."

"Who were he?"

"I don't know?"

"Was he killed?"

"Naw."

"Not shot at?"

"No, nothin'."

"What then happened?"

"Nothin'."

There were those in the crowd who were disappointed.

They were looking for another sensation.

They wanted to hear of another tragedy upon the Fatal Trail, another murder at the Death's Canyon, so long as it did not affect them.

"Yer say yer don't know the driver?"

"I does not."

"Never saw him before?"

"No, or ef I did I don't know it."

"Is he a scout?"

"Don't know."

"Or a soldier?"

"I can't tell."

"Why, Brighton, what ails you, for you do not seem to know anything about the brave fellow who took the coach through in the face of such desperate odds against him," said Boss Pete Porter angrily.

"Don't git huffy, boss, for I doesn't know."

As he was not the hero himself, who had taken the coach through, Driver Brighton was treasuring up his surprise to make the most of it for himself.

He would at least be sought after, when he gave a hint of what he did know.

Seeing that Pete Porter was not pleased with his hanging back he at last said:

"Boss, I wants ter explain why I don't know nothin' about ther gent as drove ther huss through ter Fort Famine and back to Fort Rest, whar I took it."

"I wish that you would."

"Yer see he were masked."

"Masked?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Buffalo Bill's driver."

A murmur of amazement ran over the dense crowd, and then, having excited his listeners to the utmost, Driver Brighton told the story of the Masked Driver, unknown apparently to all except Buffalo Bill, who had taken the coach to Fort Famine and back without molestation.

CHAPTER XLII.

A STRANGER BY THE WAYSIDE.

THOUGH not the man who had taken the coach through to Fort Famine, Driver Brighton had his vanity gratified by still being looked upon as a hero in Trail End City.

He had brought the news of the Masked Driver going through, and he was the driver of the same coach as far as Fort Rest and back, and that was a great deal he found out, for he was invited to drink by every one who wished to hear his story until he found himself not only unable to talk, but to navigate as well, and the overcome hero was taken to bed by admiring friends, who, in drinking his health, had become very nearly in a like condition as he was.

With a head that felt as big as a barrel the next morning, Driver Brighton swore off, for he was convinced that it was not the part of a hero to get drunk like any ordinary mortal.

He was told, too, by the stage boss that there was valuable Express matter to go to Fort Rest, and there might be some passengers, and hence he must brace up, or another man would be sent in his place.

This sbered Brighton at once, for he could not share the honors of being a hero with any one else, and besides he dearly loved that run to Fort Rest, or rather his stay there after his arrival, the boys treated him so well.

So Brighton went into a life of seclusion for a couple of days, and emerged thoroughly himself again the day before he was to start upon his return run to Fort Rest.

The coaches came in from east, south and north, and though they brought no passengers, the one from the eastward had more Express matter for Fort Rest, and more as well for Fort Famine.

When he came out in the morning for his start, after a hearty breakfast, the driver found the Express matter all safely stored in the cuddy under the box seat, the horses ready, and nothing to do but mount and await the command of Pete Porter to go.

The whole settlement was there, too, to bid him good-speed, and many a one called out to him to get all the points down fine about the Masked Driver, so as to tell them on his return in four days.

"Find out who he is, Pard Brighton, and I'll jist put up ther money ter git yer loaded myself," cried one.

"Me too," yelled another, and so it went on until Brighton felt that he would have to join the Rocky Mountain Total Abstinence Society did he expect to keep from dying a drunkard.

"All ready, Brighton?" called out Pete Porter.

"All ready, sir."

"Go!"

Away went the horses as the whip cracked,

and the stable-boys sprung back from the heads of the leaders.

A shout followed from the crowd, and all eyes watched the coach go down the hill, cross the stream, and wind up the mountain trail until it disappeared in the distance.

Here and there as he passed a lonely cabin, within a mile or more of The Wayside, Brighton was waved a good-by from the dweller therein, who had not been down to see him start.

"Luck to you, old man," cried one, while further on another called out:

"Don't lose your life in Death's Canyon, pard, for there have too many good men gone that way already."

"Never fear for me, pard," was the hopeful response of the driver, and without a shadow upon his brow, and only sunshine in his heart, he went on climbing up the mountain-side.

The first relay was come to, and the usual halt made for a change of horses, and then the journey was continued.

The next relay was come to, for it was a mountainous road to Fort Rest, and there were two stock corrals between there and Trail End City, and once more the horses were changed.

"Any news, pards?" asked the driver as he drove up to the last relay.

"Hain't heerd none, hain't seen nobody," was the answer.

"What's the news down Trail End way?" asked one of the stock-tenders.

"Nothin', only ther boys got me away off when I went in and told them about ther Masked Driver."

"Did they believe it?"

"Does yer know any man would enjoy callin' me a liar, pard?" was the very significant rejoinder.

The stock-tender did not appear to have any acquaintance who cared to call Brighton a liar, and so argument there was none, and the coach went on once more.

Five miles from the corral, and when within ten of Fort Rest, Driver Brighton halted in crossing a stream to water his horses, when suddenly there appeared in the trail ahead of him a man, who called out:

"Don't shoot, pard, fer I hain't no road-agent, only a miner as wants a lift to Fort Famine."

CHAPTER XLIII.

TREACHERY.

DRIVER BRIGHTON was a man of good heart, and he could not refuse the wretched looking vagabond who accosted him a ride on the coach.

He had dropped his hand upon his revolver at sight of him, believing he was to be held up, but the words, quickly uttered by the man, disarmed his suspicion and he said:

"Ef yer is in hard luck, pard, and can't pay yer tax, I'll treat yer to ther ride as fer as I go."

"Yer is mighty good, fer I is in hard luck, and so awful poor I hain't got nothin', fer my last gun went fer grub and I is thet hungry I c'd chaw grass."

The man was a hard-looking specimen of humanity certainly.

His hair and beard were unkempt, his boots much the worse for wear, and his general make-up that of a man in really hard luck.

"It's all drink, yer see, and gamblin'."

"I got drunk back in ther camps and ther boys cleaned me out, so I jist started fer ther new mines I has heerd of up near Fort Famine, fer I kin git a stake thar, I guesses, and ef not I kin join ther army."

The driver smiled, at the thought of such a vagabond entering the army, but he said:

"Well, I have a part of my lunch here, you can have, and I'll give you a seat on the box with me ter Fort Rest, and there the soldiers and scouts will give you a helping hand, for the Boys in Blue never go back on one in distress."

"Yer is mighty kind, pard, and I 'preciates it, deed I does—my! but this lunch do taste powerful good and no mistake."

Brighton seemed really to enjoy seeing the man eat, and to have given him a lift along the trail, and chatted pleasantly with him, with no thought of treachery until suddenly the stranger drew his hand from his bosom, there was a flash and report, and with a moan the driver would have fallen from his box, had not the murderer caught him and thrown him back on the top of the coach.

Then he grasped the reins and drew the startled horses to a walk, when he glanced back along the trail.

Almost immediately there came into view two men upon foot, and walking rapidly.

As they drew near the coach one of them called out:

"You got him, Dave?"

"You bet I did," was the answer of the man on the box.

"Dead?"

"I shoots ter kill, and it were a very neat job."

"Where's the plunder?"

"In ther cuddy under ther seat here."

"I'll hand it to yer."

He took out the Express packages, three in number and handed them down to the other two men, who were a most villainous looking pair of ruffians.

"What'll yer do with ther deader?" asked one.

"Leave him whar he is, soon as I has fingered his pockets."

"And ther team?"

"Start it on ther trail for ther fort."

"Better not, for ther critters might git thar too quick."

"What'll I do then?"

"Why jist tie 'em and let them at ther fort come out and look 'em up, when ther coach don't git in on time."

"All right."

"I'll be with yer soon as I makes ther critters fast."

He drove the animals out of the trail to where there were some trees that they could be hitched to, and making them fast he went on after his comrades, who had swung the Express packages upon a stick to be carried on their shoulders.

Then the three started off, the pretended vagabond taking off the boots he had worn and putting on moccasins in their stead, and which would leave no track, his two comrades wearing the same.

They started on then at a brisk step, going over hill and down valley seemingly with untiring step, for mile after mile was left behind them.

At length the sun went down, twilight followed, then night came on, but still the three men trudged along untiringly, one relieving the other two from time to time in carrying the pole upon which the Express packages were hanging.

But the darkness did not retard their way, for they knew the trail well, from the steady manner in which they held on, and still without showing fatigue.

At length they turned into a broad and shallow stream, flowing through a canyon with lofty banks of rocks upon either side.

Into the stream they went, turning against the current, and after wading for half a mile they stepped out upon some rocks and began the ascent of the steep hill, or almost cliff.

A climb of sixty feet brought them to a plateau, where, under a mountain spur they came upon a rudely made cabin, built against the solid rock.

"Well, pards, here we is, and I hope when the capt'n sees what we has captered ter-morrow, he'll find it a rich prize."

"Now for supper and then ter sleep, for I'm tired out."

"Yas, killin' that driver made you tired I guesses."

"Yer don't exercise enough in thet line o' work, ter git yer hand in," growled one of his companions.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FOUND.

It was the afternoon of the day when Brighton was expected in with the coach from Trail End City, that the sentinel beheld a man on foot approaching Fort Rest.

He reported the fact, and as the pedestrian drew nearer made it known that he recognized in him the Masked Driver.

It was the Masked Driver, looking fresh, and stepping with elastic tread as though he felt no fatigue, and had not tramped far.

He acknowledged the military salute the sentinel gave him, and handed to the corporal his pass from the colonel, which at once admitted him to the fort.

His steps led him toward the cabin of Buffalo Bill, and on the way thither he met a number who greeted him with marked respect.

Halting at the office of the stage boss, he reported that he would be ready to take the coach out on time the following morning, and was passing on when Boss Gill said:

"I say, pard, the coach is now half-an-hour late."

"Do you think anything could have happened to it on the trail between here and Trail End City, sir?"

"No telling."

"If you wish, I shall be glad to mount a horse, sir, and go out to look the coach up."

"Well, if Brighton does not come in within the next half-hour I will get you to do so, for there were some valuable packages to come through on this run."

"I will be ready at any time, sir."

"You will find me at Buffalo Bill's cabin should you want me," and the Masked Driver passed on.

Gill, the stage-master waited impatiently for awhile, and yet no report came from the sentinel on the watch-tower of the coach being in sight.

The soldiers and others were gathering at the station to see the coach come in, and at last word came from Colonel Miles asking if Brighton had arrived.

Then Gill went to Buffalo Bill's cabin after the Masked Driver.

He was most curious to know who that driver was, and felt provoked that he at least was not let into the secret by Buffalo Bill, no matter who else were kept from it.

He therefore wanted to catch the man unprepared, and so acted slyly.

He walked lightly to the door, put his hand on the latch and suddenly opened the door.

There sat the driver by the window, studying a map, but *he was masked*.

Gill was mad clean through because he was foiled, yet dared not show it.

So he said as pleasantly as he could:

"I have come, sir, to ask you to go and look Brighton up, for he is an hour and a half behind, and this looks bad on the trail between here and Trail End City."

"Certainly, sir, I will take one of Buffalo Bill's horses and be off in five minutes."

As though well-acquainted with his surroundings the Masked Driver took an extra saddle and bridle the scout had there in the cabin, and going to the scouts' corral, selected one of the best horses of the lot.

In a minute he was lassoed, saddled, bridled and mounted, when the Masked Driver went dashing out of the fort at a sweeping gallop.

The crowd cheered him, and he acknowledged the compliment by a bow.

Out of the gate he went and was soon lost to sight in the distance.

All waited with what patience they could, the result of his going.

That some accident had befallen the coach they felt certain, but was it the death of the driver?

Were the same red scenes to be enacted upon the trail between the fort and Trail End City, that had been between Fort Rest and Fort Famine.

The sun went down in a blaze of glory, twilight cast its golden haze over the land, and at last darkness crept on so gently that it was hardly noticed until no longer could objects be seen in the distance.

One, two hours passed away since the departure of the Masked Driver.

The coach was now nearly four hours behind, and surely something had gone wrong.

Three hours had the Masked Driver been gone when the sentinel on the watch-tower heard the distant rumble of wheels.

Later he reported the coach coming along the trail at a rapid pace, and soon into the stockade dashed the lumbering vehicle, with the Masked Driver on the box, and Brighton nowhere visible.

CHAPTER XLV.

STARTLING NEWS.

BUT for the fact that "Taps" had sent the soldiers to their barracks, and put the fort under the night guard, all the people within those stockade walls would have been on hand to receive the coach when it came in.

"Where is Brighton?" cried the stage-master, as soon as the Masked Driver came to a halt at the station.

"Dead, in the coach, sir," was the reply.

"Dead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you find the coach?"

"Back on the trail about ten miles, the horses hitched to a tree, and Brighton lying in the road dead, where he had fallen from the box."

"What! was he ill, or—"

"He was shot."

"Hal! by whom?"

"The Mysterious Murderers of course, for who else could it be, sir, as the coach had been robbed."

"Curses! this is getting to be appalling."

"It has been so for some time, I take it," was the quiet remark of the Masked Driver.

"No one was there?"

"I saw no one, sir, for it was dark when I reached the coach, and being off the trail, where the team was hitched, I would not have seen it but for discovering the body of poor Brighton lying in the road, and then hearing one of the horses neigh."

"And then?"

"I found that the body of the driver had been rifled of all valuables, so I placed it in the coach, and then discovered that the packages had also been taken."

"Well, you had better make your report to Colonel Miles, and I suppose this will end the coach runs beyond Trail End City," disconsolately said Gill.

"Why so, sir?"

"Who will dare now take a coach between here and Trail End City?"

"I will, sir."

"You?"

"Yes, I'll drive the whole run, as was formerly done by the drivers."

"I am glad to hear you say so, but I fear you will not last long."

"I can at least try it," was the reply.

"You are game clean through and no mistake; but you had better go and report what has happened to the colonel."

The Masked Driver went at once to the quarters of Colonel Miles, and was admitted.

"Well, sir, I have just heard that you returned with Brighton's coach?"

"Yes, colonel, and brought poor Brighton's body back in it."

"Hal! I had not learned more than that you had brought it in."

"Tell me of your discovery."

The Masked Driver did so and the colonel listened with deepest attention, and then said:

"Well, driver, what do you make out of this?"

"That the Mysterious Murderers have extended their field of operations, sir."

"To the Trail End and Fort Rest line?"

"Yes, sir."

"And given up the Fort Rest and Famine line?"

"No, sir, I am not prepared to say that, for they may strike on both runs."

"Then there is but one thing to do and that is, as the red-skins are quiet now, to allow each coach to go under guard."

"No, colonel, there is no need of a guard, for I will take the whole drive, sir, from Trail End City to Fort Famine and back."

The colonel looked at the Masked Man before him with surprise, and asked:

"Do you suppose that will check the deeds of these murderers, your driving?"

"I passed through in safety on the last run, sir."

"And may be murdered on this."

"I'll risk it, sir."

"Well, go ahead, but I am greatly tempted to guard the whole line."

"Do not do so, Colonel Miles, do not send any men from camp unless necessary, for I intended to inform you, sir, that the Indians are not as quiet as you believe, and Buffalo Bill wished me to say to you to throw out nearly all of the scouts toward the red-skin country, with orders to report every suspicious move, and have the men in buckskin at Fort Famine also go out."

"You surprise me, for after the thrashing we lately gave the Sioux they certainly cannot be upon the eve of another fight against us."

"Let me explain to you, colonel, that the Cheyennes to the north have come southward and allied themselves with their old enemies against the whites."

"They came with food, tepees and ponies in plenty, and readily aided the Sioux in their distress and need after your battle with them, and thus emboldened by the alliance the combined forces are in a very ugly and threatening mood, so it will be well, Cody says, to run a double line of scouts across the country from here to Fort Famine, and have others to scout as near the Indian country as possible, to watch every move of the red-skins."

"This is startling news surely," said Colonel Miles, with considerable surprise.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SCOUTS TO THE FRONT.

"It is startling news, Colonel Miles, but it is the truth, as Cody will vouch for when he comes to see you," said the Masked Driver.

"When will he come?"

"Day after to-morrow night, sir."

"Well, I am glad of the warning, and I will prepare accordingly."

"But where is Cody now?"

"He is scouting, sir."
 "Toward the Indian country?"
 "No, sir, on the Fatal Trail."
 "I see, and you take the coach out in the morning?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "May you be as fortunate as last time."
 "But then you run on to Trail End City after your return here?"
 "I do, sir."
 "Well, this whole mysterious affair is in your hands, and Cody's, and I wish you success."

"But now to sending out these scouts."
 "Here is a map, hastily drawn, sir, showing the position of the Sioux camps, which they have changed from their old ones, and the place where the Cheyenne village is, with the distances apart marked, and also the number of miles between them and the forts."

"These red dots, sir, are in double lines, you see, Colonel Miles, and they mark the positions where the scouts are to take their posts, while the red lines are the trails the scouts who move about are to traverse."

"This will be a strong barrier between you and the red-skins, and by the scouts keeping out of sight of the Indians they will expect, should they make a raid, to surprise you, or Fort Famine, for they will attack one of the forts first in full force, and then sweep down upon the other."

"Who drew this map, sir?"

"I did, sir."

"It is just what I have wanted, and I thank you for it."

"I see that you have the Fatal Trail marked upon it."

"Yes, sir, it gives the country westward of the Fatal Trail line."

"I am glad to get it, for it appears to me to be exact, but now to these scouts?"

"In what respect, sir?"

"When should I send them?"

"I would send them out to-night, sir, showing them this map and letting each man take position as he has been assigned."

"I will order them to report to me at once, and I will take all the force?"

"Save half a dozen men, sir, whom it would be well to keep at the fort."

The orderly was at once dispatched to the scouts' quarters, to order thirty of their number to report to Colonel Miles within the hour, ready to start upon a long expedition, with ten days' provisions, and well mounted and armed.

"Cody has forty-four men in buckskin in his command, and Hill was killed driving the coach, and to-night Buckskin Charlie, next in command, went out with an officer and four soldiers to meet Buffalo Bill."

"Did they meet him?"

"Yes, sir, and are with him now."

"That leaves forty-two scouts in camp, and thirty going out will give me here twelve, which will be enough, and more, for any need I may have of them about the fort."

"If the Indians move, sir, those on duty will come in before them, and Buffalo Bill will also be here, you may be certain."

"I am very sure of that, for he is always on hand when wanted."

"Now let me tell you that there are two officers who wish to go over to Fort Famine with you to-morrow."

"On duty, sir?"

"Well, no, more in bravado, I should say, though they claim that they are anxious to see some friends there, and will return with you next day."

"I should rather they would not go, sir."

"Why so?"

"Well, colonel, my life is my own, and you do not care to lose two gallant young officers, should I be knocked off my box with a bullet, though of course my loss would be of little moment."

"I hardly agree with you in the latter, though I do in the first assertion, so I will refuse to allow them to go."

"It would be best, sir, until we see what the Mysterious Murderers will do on this run," and the Masked Driver turned to go, when the colonel said:

"If you do not mind, sir, I would like to have you remain and give the scouts, when they come, certain directions about this country, for you must be most familiar with it to have drawn this map."

"I know every foot of it, sir."

"Then help me direct the scouts to their posts of duty, please."

"With pleasure, sir," and when the scouts began to drop in, surprised at a call for so many men by night, for scouting duty, that required ten days' provisions, the Masked Driver gave them full instructions as to what their positions and duties were, each one showing marked respect for a man they did not know, but whom they knew as their chief's pard, and who had proven his claim to respect and admiration from them.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE MASKED DRIVER'S SECOND RUN.

HAVING sent the scouts out, Colonel Miles, ever on the alert to guard against attack, had at once held a consultation with his officers, told them of the news he had received, and ordered that the whole command be kept as though in a state of siege, though nothing should be said to alarm the people.

The next morning four-fifths of the garrison were on hand to see the coach start on its drive to Fort Famine.

Out of Buffalo Bill's cabin, five minutes before starting time, came the Masked Driver, and he bowed courteously to the salutations that greeted him.

He reported to Stage-master Gill, and then mounting his box, gathered up his reins and awaited the word.

The coach was empty, the windows open, and only the mail was aboard, for for some reasons the robbers never molested Uncle Sam's letters, though delaying their delivery often by their deeds of lawlessness.

"Go!"

With the word the whip cracked, the horses bounded forward, and the coach went on its way with a rush, the driver, as he left the stockade, taking up his stage-horn and ringing out the air of—

"Farewell, farewell is a lonely sound,
 And always brings a sigh;
 But give to me that good old word
 That comes from the heart, good-by."

"That man is a wonder, and no mistake," said an officer, looking after the Masked Driver, to whom he referred.

"Yes, a marvel."

"Why, he seems to fairly revel in the risk he runs," answered the man he addressed.

"And it is just such men as he who will get through when nine others would go under."

"Very true."

And so went the conversation around the fort, the Masked Driver being the subject, and all more than ever mystified by his strange action in going masked and remaining unknown.

As for Colonel Miles, he hardly yet knew whether to believe the Masked Driver was or was not Buffalo Bill.

The coach disappeared over the ridge, and the Masked Driver slackened his pace.

When he halted at the first brook to water his horses, he dismounted from his box and entered the coach.

He was inside for quite a while, and when he emerged he had changed his attire.

Then he shut the coach up close, and resuming his box and reins moved on as before.

"Well, yer is back ag'in, pard?" said Murdock, as he drove up to Relay Number Three."

"Oh, yes, why not?"

"I thought maybe Brighton being killed might frighten you off."

The Masked Driver did not immediately reply:

"Oh, no, it would take more than one man's death to frighten me off the trail I am on, and in fact I intend to drive Brighton's run now."

"Yer does?"

"I do."

"Better not."

"Why not?"

"Yer seems ter dare death."

"I dare the gang of red-handed murderers who infest the Fatal Trail to shoot me from my box, for I know what the result to them will be there and then."

"Other drivers they may kill, other coaches they may halt, but Pard Murdock, they will discover their mistake when they

kill me and attempt to rob my stage, mark my words, and recall them when they make the break," and the manner and words of the Masked Driver were impressive, not uttered in bravado, and so Murdock took them, for he said:

"Somehow I believe you has got a trap set fer em, and has 'em foul."

"Wait and see," was the laconic and significant response, and again declining food and drink the Masked Driver left the relay station, after being told that Foxey was at Number Four that day.

Arriving at Number Four the men said that Foxey was off on his rounds of the station corrals, and after a short halt the Masked Driver went on.

He had passed once more the gantlet of Death's Canyon, and without seeing a soul, or meeting with any adventure.

He arrived in sight of Fort Famine just on time, and as before found an excited throng to receive him, anxious to know what had happened to him on the run out.

He at once sought Major Dean and gave to him the dispatches sent by Colonel Miles, while at the latter's request, he made known to him what he had said about the alliance of the Sioux and Cheyennes, and a premeditated raid by their combined forces upon the forts.

"One of my scouts came in yesterday with a note he had been given by Cody for me, and it gave me warning to look out for a surprise, and yet I could not understand how the Sioux could have rallied so soon after their terrible defeat," said the major.

"Through the coming of the village of Cheyennes, to fight against a common foe, sir."

"Yes, I can understand it now."

"But tell me, what about your run through Death's Canyon to-day?"

"I saw several wolves prowling about the canyon, sir, and a bird was sitting upon the headboard over Harkaway Harry's grave and singing merrily, and this was proof to me that there was no one there, for the coming of my coach startled the coyotes, as well as the sweet songster away."

"Colonel Miles says, however, that Brighton was killed yesterday upon the trail to Trail End City?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then the murderers have gone to that trail perhaps."

"They did strike there, sir; but I shall drive through to Trail End City to-morrow, and I do not believe I will meet with any difficulty in doing so," was the confident reply of the Masked Driver.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BACK AGAIN.

HAVING discussed the pros and cons of the situation with Major Dean, as Colonel Miles's letter requested, the Masked Driver said:

"I wish now to say to you, Major Dean, that I have still better reasons for telling you that your daughter is safe, as also Mrs. Gale, and the young soldier."

"This certainly rejoices my heart, sir, and I thank you for every word you have uttered," said Major Dean with deep feeling.

Then he added:

"But you do not give me your reasons for saying what you do."

"Nor can I, sir, for I give you hope, and yet dare not say too much yet awhile; but I am working for the restoration of your daughter, and yet I can only add that all that can be done, will be."

"I believe that most sincerely, sir; but, pardon me for the suggestion—but suppose you should lose your life in the Death's Canyon, or other accident befall you?"

"I am not looking to that end, Major Dean, but should it occur I will say that I am not alone on this still hunt to find your daughter, and, in doing so, to discover and punish the red fiends whose lives are forfeited to the laws they have broken against God, man and woman."

"Again you encourage me with more hope, and I shall place full trust in you, sir."

"Now I must send out the scouts, ordered by Colonel Miles to co-operate with those from Fort Rest, and I can spare twenty men, and he says that you will post them, for he has sent me a hastily-drawn map from one in his possession."

"Yes, sir, it is one I sketched from one I gave to him, as he requested me to do so to give you a full knowledge of the position of the scouts, and the Indian villages, as also the trails they must take to surprise you, or Fort Rest, whichever place they strike first."

The Masked Driver then explained the map fully to Major Dean, while the scouts were preparing to take the trails, and when they came, also thirty in number, he directed each man to his position, they treating him with the same deep respect as the men in buckskin at Fort Rest had done.

In fact, the scouts looked upon the Masked Driver with a certain awe which they could not fathom.

When the scouts had departed Major Dean called a consultation of his officers, at which the Masked Driver was present by his request, and the news he had received was placed before them, and one and all told to put their commands in position for a surprise and for hard work, but to keep any alarm from extending among those who were not soldiers.

The Masked Driver explained the alliance of the Sioux and Cheyenne villages, and that a large force of their warriors were getting ready for a raid upon the forts beyond all doubt.

The officers, as the scouts had done, listened with deep attention to all that the Masked Driver said, for he had won their respect by his deeds, while that masked face told of something back of it that they in vain tried to fathom.

All ten officers were surprised, and delighted as well, to see how Major Dean had brightened up in the two visits to the fort of the Masked Driver.

He was not a man to allow personal troubles and sorrow to interfere with his duties as an officer, and had neglected nothing for the safety and good of his command.

Yet all had noticed that the blow that had fallen upon him, his lost daughter, her uncertain fate, had told deeply upon his nature, always before cheery and full of pleasure at the enjoyment of others.

The change was seen at once, and all attributed it to the Masked Driver in some mysterious way.

The next morning all the fort was on hand to see the coach start off.

The driver came out of Buffalo Bill's cabin as before, had a few words with the stage-master, took the package handed to him by Major Dean's orderly, and addressed to Colonel Miles, and, with a salute to those who cheered him, mounted his box, gathered up his reins, and, at the word, was off.

Soon the coach rolled out of sight, and then the excitement settled down into almost gloom, for the suspense as to what might occur was greater to bear than the actual reality.

Back to Station Four drove the Masked Driver, having halted upon the way as before, and closed up his coach, and, after a short talk with the men, and a change of horses, went on his way toward the Death's Canyon, having been told by Murdock, who had again returned to his post, that "Captain" Fox was still out upon the trails, visiting the relay corrals.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE MEETING IN THE CANYON.

WHEN he approached Death's Canyon, as upon former occasions, the Masked Driver drew his team down to a walk, cocked his repeating rifle and laid it across his knees, put one revolver on the seat by his side and had the other in his belt, ready to draw when the necessity to do so should arrive.

The horses went along with ears pricked, as though they scented danger, and this put the Masked Driver thoroughly upon his guard.

As he entered the open space, so frequently referred to before, the keen eyes glaring through the mask, saw a horseman approaching.

He was just entering the space which Buffalo Bill had named the Burying Ground, from the other end.

"It is Foxey," said the Masked Rider to himself, and he drew his horses to a halt.

Foxy came on at a canter now, and called out:

"Sorry I didn't see yer when yer passed Number Three, pard o' ther mask, but I was out on my rounds inspectin' ther corrals, for yer may not know I is capt'in of the relay lay-out atween Trail End City and Famine?"

"Oh, yes, I knew that?"

"Well, is ail well in the corrals?"

"Yes."

"How is it with you?"

"Couldn't ask to have it better."

"Yer hain't been attacked once, has yer?"

"Fortunately for those thieving murderers, no."

"And for yourself?"

"Oh, I don't mind, for I would give my life any time to know that they were hanging."

"You is generous, pard; but it's catchin' before hanging."

"Yes, and when those men fire on me you will be surprised, Captain Fox, to see how quickly every one of them are roped in."

"I want ter know."

"But kin yer do it?"

"Wait and see."

"Then yer has a trap o' some kind ter spring?"

"Not only one trap, Captain Fox, but several of them."

"Waal I'll be darned."

"But see here, pard?"

"Well?"

"You is on ther war-hunt for them Mysterious Murderers?"

"For the sake of argument, Foxey, suppose I say yes."

"Well, now, why can't yer let me in on this deal?"

"How so?"

"There's big money offered for them men, as you knows."

"Yes, a very handsome sum by the stage company."

"You surely want some help, and don't want all ther dust, does yer?"

"I want all I can get, Pard Foxey."

"Now I hain't greedy, and if yer will let me in on yer leetle racket, I'll take one-quarter share and work hard fer you."

"You know there are several rewards offered."

"Several? No!"

"Yes."

"I didn't know that."

"I may say five or six."

"I want ter know?"

"Now what is they?"

"One by the stage company."

"Yes."

"Another by the Scouts' League, since Hill was killed."

"Two, that be."

"A third by Colonel Miles, as one soldier has been killed and another captured."

"Captured?"

"Yes."

"How does yer know he hain't been kilt?"

"He may be, but as his body was not found, it was surmised that he was captured."

"I see."

"That makes three."

"Yes, and Major Dean offers a most liberal reward for the recovery of his daughter and capture of the band of mysterious murderers."

"That makes four."

"The miners, too, have chipped in for a liberal purse, as some of their number have been killed, you know."

"So I has heard."

"That makes five."

"Yes and there is one other reward for the red fiends."

"What are they?"

"The gallows!"

Foxy laughed at this and replied:

"I guess nobody wants ter git thet reward."

"But what do t'others yer named run up to?"

"Altogether about twenty thousand dollars."

"Lordy! thet are a young fortin' and I does wish yer'd let me in on yer racket, fer I is sart'in yer has struck some trail, and bein' right here on ther spot, I might sarve yer well."

"Well, I have thought of that, and when I get my plans all made as I wish them, I'll give you a call, Foxey."

"Thankee."

"Now how is it thet you kin run this trail and not git kilt, as t'others has been?"

"Because I am sure, Foxey, only do not speak of it to any one outside of the stage company's people, that the murderers have learned in some way that I have a trap for them, which, when they make a break, will wipe the last one of them off the face of the earth."

"But not a hint of this, or it may spoil all," and the Masked Driver spoke in a whisper.

"No indeed, you kin trust me."

"But what is yer leetle game?"

"I'll tell you when I make known my plans to bag the murderers alive."

"Now I must be going, so good by, Foxey," and the Masked Driver started ahead leaving the relay boss seated upon his horse and gazing after him with a strange expression on his face.

CHAPTER L.

THE MIDNIGHT VISIT.

WHEN the coach came into Fort Rest it was not closed, as it had been when passing the relay station and through Death's Canyon.

The blinds were down, and the curtains were up on each side, as when it had started upon its way from each fort.

The shout that went up in Fort Rest, when the sentinel reported that it was the Masked Driver on the box, and that he was coming in on time, reached the ears of the man thus saluted.

He rolled into the fort with his horn sending out cheery notes, and as he drew rein the band, on the parade ground, struck up very appropriately the air:

"Home Again."

"You got through O. K. again, pard," cried Gill as the Masked Driver dismounted from his box.

"Oh yes, and without the slightest trouble."

"No outlaws on the trail?"

"None that I saw."

"You'll catch it upon the run to Trail End City, I guess, for they have gone there now."

"Perhaps."

"You will drive back to Trail End, you told me?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you get through in safety, I'll believe you bear a charmed life."

"I have that belief now," was the response of the Masked Driver pleasantly, and he walked away to look at the parade and after it was dismissed went up to headquarters to report to Colonel Miles, who, seeing him, called to him to join him.

The Masked Driver obeyed, saluting like a soldier, and walked on with the colonel to his quarters, where he handed to him the dispatches from Major Dean, and gave an account of his run to Fort Famine and back.

The colonel asked him many questions, and then said:

"I had word from the scouts' line an hour ago, and the report is that the red-skins are certainly preparing for some move, and it can only be against us, so I did the right thing in following Cody's advice, and yours, in sending the Men in Buckskin out to the front, to be between us and a raid."

"Yes, sir, for you cannot be surprised now."

"Well, my masked friend, you will take the coach to Trail End City in the morning, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, I will make the attempt."

"Do you not wish an escort?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Well, you know best, and good fortune attend you is my heartiest prayer," and the colonel shook hands with the Masked Driver, who went at once to the cabin of Buffalo Bill.

But he had not been there long before he came out, looked cautiously about him, sought the shadow of a row of trees and made his way to the officers' park, the timber before spoken of and where there was the colonel's gate in the stockade wall.

He reached the gate, removed the bars, unlocked it, and in stepped a tall form.

"Thanks pard I'll go at once to headquarters for I suppose the colonel is there?"

"Yes, Bill for I saw him there a couple of hours ago."

"Then had you not best await for me here, to bar the gate after I go out, for I will not be gone long?"

"Yes, I will wait here for you."

The other then moved rapidly on to the quarters of the colonel, passed the sentinel, and sent his name in by the orderly, when he was at once admitted.

"Well, Cody, I am glad to see you, but I assure you that between the Masked Driver and yourself I am getting sadly mixed."

"You still are in doubt, colonel, as to whether I am masquerading as the Masked Driver, or not?" asked Buffalo Bill, with a smile.

"I must confess that I am not clear in my mind about it, and yet I do not wish to doubt either his word, or your own, if there be two of you, instead of one," and the colonel looked quizzically at Cody, who rejoined:

"There are two of us, colonel, just now, myself and my second self, or my shadower, for we are working on each other's trails for a good purpose."

"I can believe that; but where is Lieutenant Manning Moore and his men, with Buckskin Charlie, who went with them?"

"They are on duty, sir, and I have come to ask of you seven more of my scouts, and I wish them to night."

"You are aware that I sent thirty to the Indian country, as you suggested?"

"Yes, sir, and they will save you a surprise; but you can spare me seven of my Men in Buckskin, can you not, sir?"

"Of course, if you wish it."

"Colonel Miles, it is not my wish to keep you in the dark as to my movements, and what is being done, and if all comes out as we have planned, you will then understand why I did so: but I can secretly work to far better advantage, for I am my own master, and you will, I hope, soon see the results."

"All right, Cody, go ahead on the trail you have started upon in your own way."

"You shall have the scouts, so have you any choice of men?"

"Yes, sir, I would like these seven men sent for," and Buffalo Bill handed the colonel a list of seven names.

CHAPTER LI.

OFF TO TRAIL END CITY.

THE scouts came to headquarters, seven in number, and they seemed surprised at seeing Buffalo Bill there.

He greeted them pleasantly and said:

"I wish you to go at once, pards, and prepare for a ten days' trip."

"When ready, ride out of the fort and halt at the cottonwood tree on the plains, which is known as The Sentinel."

"Lose no time in getting there, and I will meet you."

"Under no circumstances speak of my being in the fort."

"You understand?"

They answered in the affirmative, and left for their quarters.

After some further conversation with the colonel, Buffalo Bill took his leave, having made the same request as before, that the sentinel and the orderly should be instructed not to speak of his coming to the fort.

He made his way quickly to the little gate in the stockade wall, and there was met by his unknown companion, with whom he talked earnestly for some minutes.

Then they parted, Buffalo Bill going through the gate and the Masked Driver closing it after him.

While the latter returned to the cabin where he made his quarters, the scout hastily glided away to a distant clump of trees, where a horse was staked out awaiting him.

Mounting, he rode on to the place of rendezvous appointed with the scouts.

He arrived at the lone cottonwood tree and had not long to wait, the scouts soon coming in sight, riding in Indian file.

"Well, pards, you are here on time and I am glad of it, for you have some distance to travel before morning breaks."

"We are all ready for any racket, Pard

Bill," said the leader of the party, Arizona Bob, a man with a record.

"I wish you to go to what you know, Arizona Bob, as Bee Hive Cliffs, and you will find Buckskin Charlie there awaiting you, and one other who will lead you to the party you are to act as guide and scout for, and which Lieutenant Manning Moore commands."

"He is a good one, none better" was Arizona Bob's quiet tribute to the young officer.

"Yes, he is just the man for the work on hand."

"You will go to his command, and the rest of you, boys, will go under the leadership of Buckskin Charlie, who will take you to the secret camp he knows of."

"With you, Arizona Bob, Lieutenant Moore will have six in his party, for he has four Indians with him, and Buckskin Charlie will have seven, including himself, and this is just the force I need to carry out my plans with."

"We'll do it, chief, never fear."

"Name the game and we'll follow you to death to bring it down," was Arizona Bob's response.

"I know that, boys."

"Now, good-night, for I have business elsewhere, but will see you in a day or two."

With this the scout rode one way, the men under Arizona Bob bending their steps toward the Bee Hive Cliffs, a dozen miles distant.

The way taken by Buffalo Bill was to the eastward, and he rode at a gallop for mile after mile.

At last he halted in a little valley, unsaddled his horse and staked him out, and on foot made his way to a rocky hill overhanging a swiftly-flowing stream, a mile away from where he had made his temporary camp.

He went up among the rocks, searched about until he found a place to suit him, and then spreading his blankets, laid down to rest, falling asleep almost immediately.

Back at the fort, after parting with Buffalo Bill, the Masked Driver had returned to the cabin where he made his quarters, and at once retired for the night.

He was up in good time, had his breakfast, which the cook of the officers' mess brought to him, and then started for the station to go out on the coach.

The interest in the going and coming of the coach, and in the mysterious unknown who so lightly risked his life, had increased instead of diminished, and the result was that a large crowd had again gathered to see the departure of the stage.

The Masked Driver was received, as before, with loud applause, and a cheer followed him as he drove away, a "present arms" greeting him at the gate when he dashed through.

This time there was hardly a person in the fort who expected to see him again, and it was the universal belief that the Mysterious Murderers, having shifted their scene of action from Death's Canyon, were lying in wait to kill the Masked Driver on his run to Trail End City, and a feeling of feverish suspense followed his going, with many questions asked as to why Colonel Miles did not send an escort with the plucky man, and thus save his life.

CHAPTER LII.

GOING THROUGH.

WHATEVER others might think of his deadly danger on the Trail End City run, the Masked Driver, who had four times run the gantlet of Death's Canyon, took the situation very calmly.

He drove on for some miles very steadily, and then halting, went through the same movements as before on the Fatal Trail, going to and coming from Fort Famine.

That is he entered the coach, and after awhile closed it up securely.

Then he remounted his box and drove on.

As he neared the spot where he had found the coach, and the body of Brighton, who had been laid to rest the day before in the soldier's burying-ground, he drew his horses down to a walk, placed his rifle across his knees and one revolver on the seat by his side.

His eyes peered through the holes in the black mask, scanning the trail on either side far ahead of him, and he was most thoroughly on the alert for danger.

But he passed the spot in safety, went down the hill, along the valley and up a steep incline to the relay corral, blowing his stage horn before he came near the cabin, an indication that he must know that trail also.

The men were on hand to receive him, and to his surprise apparently Foxey was there.

"Ho, captain, you do indeed get around among the corrals," said the Masked Driver.

"Yas, pard, I never neglects duty, yer know; but you is on ther box, I sees, as yer said yer would be?"

"Oh, yes, why not?"

"I kinder thought as how ye might wilt, arter poor Brighton went under."

"Why should I, when if I am attacked my foes will quickly string for it, while poor Brighton was unprotected?"

"I doesn't see yer protectors, pard."

"Very true, and those who attack me will not see them, but they will feel them, Foxey, remember what I tell you, and if it's near your station you'll have burying to do after the hanging bee is over."

"I kin do the planting, and glad of it, for this trail is gittin' ter be a terror; why I is afeerd o' bein' held up myself, travelin' the trails, though it's mighty leetle they'd git frum me."

"Have you been the rounds of the relays, Foxey, for if not you can ride on with me."

"Thankee, I has been to Number One, and arter dinner I cuts away for my home station for I tells yer I haint hankerin' ter be on ther trails, though I does do my duty."

"You go by Fort Rest of course?"

"Waal I will, though I doesn't have ter, fer Gill he looks arter ther critturs thar."

"I'll see yer on yer return, thet is ef yer git through."

"If I do not, Fox, you may count on knowing who the Mysterious Murderers are of the Fatal Trail, for when I fail their secret comes out, and you will see that I am right in my prophecy."

"Good-by," and the Masked Driver went on his way with the same indifferent air he always wore.

He went on to the next relay without incident, driving over the really dangerous road, as it was at times, with skill and ease, and after the killing of Brighton he saw that the stock-tenders there were surprised to see him get through in safety.

They gazed at him with admiration mingled with awe, for poor driver Brighton had told them of this strange man of the masked face, a man wholly unknown it seemed to every one.

Driving on from Relay Number One, he put the horses to a more rapid gait to run in to Trail End early.

The loafers at The Wayside, the miners and those who dwelt in their mountain cabins about Trail End City were startled by hearing the ringing of the stage-horn long before they had expected it.

In truth there were few who expected to see the coach come in, for, in some mysterious way the news had gone abroad of the killing of Driver Brighton, and the idea that the Masked Driver would bring the coach on to Trail End City had never entered their minds.

Next following the notes of the horn came the coach into sight upon the mountain trail, and the manner in which the man on the box brought his team down the steep road into the settlement was convincing evidence that he knew how to drive.

The crowd had begun to assemble at The Wayside with the first toot of the horn, and the trails were full of people making their way there when the coach was brought to a halt before the hotel, the horses showing that they had been pushed along at a lively pace by the new driver.

Dismounting from his box, while every eye was upon him, for the stories of Brighton were vividly recalled, the Masked Driver said, addressing Pete Porter:

"I am to report to you, sir, that Driver Brighton was shot dead in his last run to Fort Rest, and I have taken his place and brought the coach through."

CHAPTER LIII.

AN INSULT AND A CHALLENGE.

EVERY one eyed the Masked Driver as he spoke to Pete Porter, the stage boss, who had come forward to meet him.

There he stood, upright as an Indian, dressed in a jaunty suit of corduroy, with the pants stuck in handsome boots, a sash about his waist, a silk handkerchief knotted around his neck, gauntlet gloves covering his hands, and a large sombrero sheltering his head, a splendid specimen of a man.

But, strangest of all was the face so securely covered with a close-fitting black silk mask.

"A man, every bit of him.

"But who is he?"

Such was Pete Porter's mental diagnosis of the Masked Driver, and Pete was a good reader of human nature.

In this case, however, he did not see the face, yet he had heard of the record already made by the Masked Driver.

"You are welcome, pard, I assure you

"Foxy sent in word of poor Brighton's having been shot off his box, and it was a blow to us all, I can tell you.

"He left us so bright and chipper, and he seemed to have no dread of death.

"But so it goes, and to-day it may be you, to-morrow me.

"But Brighton told us all about you, and how you had dared to run the gantlet of Death's Canyon.

"Did you go through a second time?"

"Oh, yes, I went to Fort Famine, and back all right, sir?"

"And saw no outlaws?"

"Not even the photograph of one, sir."

"Well, you deserve just as much credit as though you had met them; but now about the run in?"

"It was all right, sir."

"Where was it Brighton was knocked over?"

"Ten miles, or thereabout, from Fort Rest, sir."

"When he did not come in I went out and found his coach, and his body lay in the trail near it."

"Dead?"

"Oh, yes, he was shot through the head."

"By the Mysterious Murderers of course?"

"Beyond doubt, for that is their cruel way of doing work, while the coach was robbed of the Express packages."

"Could the trail not be found?"

"They left no trail, for a search was made for it afterward."

"Well, I am awful sorry he went under, for Brighton was a good fellow, though he would spree now and then.

"He told us a good deal about you."

"Indeed!"

"I did not know that he knew anything about me to tell."

"Well, now I come to think about it he didn't."

"But he told us of your defying death as you did, and that you were unknown."

"May I ask your name, sir, to enter on my books as a driver, and remember your pay is big, for I offered three hundred dollars for the run to Fort Famine and back to Trail End City?"

"As for my name, sir, simply enter me as the Masked Driver of the Fatal Trail."

"I suppose I'll have to, as you don't give any other."

"That will do, sir, and there's little in a name after all, unless like Buffalo Bill we have made ourselves famous by gallant deeds."

"Well, down you go as the Masked Driver of Death's Canyon, and you'll be booked for the special pay allowed by the company for taking the coach a round trip over the Fatal Trail."

"As for that I do not claim it, for I am not working for the extra pay, but simply to show that the coach can go through."

"Well, I'm glad to know you, Mr. Masked Driver, and speaking for the Overland Company I will say that we owe a great deal to you, for nobody else would have driven the Fatal Trail, and, candidly speaking, I fear you will not do so long."

"Perhaps not, yet I believe you are mistaken."

"May I ask why you mask your face?"

"Because I do not wish it seen."

"That's an answer, certain; but I hope

you haven't gotten any wrong reason for wearing a mask, being some one afraid to be seen."

"If I am not afraid of death, of driving the Fatal Trail with a mask on, why should I be afraid to die without one?"

"That's logic, and a good argument; but I cannot understand why you wear a mask."

"Simply because I wish to remain unknown, because I do not wish those whom I defy to know me as I am."

"Well, you know best; but this is an awful ugly community for bad men, and I fear you may get into trouble here with your masked face, unless you have the temper of an angel."

"On the contrary I have a nature that will not brook an insult."

"But I have no dread of your settlement or its people."

"Well, let us go to supper now, for it's about ready."

"Thank you, but I eat my meals alone in my room, for I would never unmask."

The stage boss looked disappointed, for he felt he was not to know this strange, unknown man.

But he led the way into The Wayside, where he assigned the Masked Driver to a very pleasant room and ordered the best of supper sent up to him.

After supper the Masked Driver came out upon the piazza to be suddenly confronted by a burly desperado who called out:

"See here, Mister Ashamed-to-show-your-face, I guesses you is ther man yerself who has been murderin' all those poor drivers, and has now tuk ter drivin' ter keep from hangin'."

Quicker than a flash the revolver of the Masked Driver was in the face of the desperado and there was no doubting the tone and words that followed:

"Down on your knees, you dog, and retract those words, or I will kill you."

All eyes were upon the two now, and there were fully two hundred men present.

The desperado was the terror of Trail End City, and he had made it his boast that he intended to insult the Masked Driver and then tear his mask from his face.

But the quick move of the driver frustrated him, for there was no argument, no quarrel, and the desperado was at his mercy.

So he growled out:

"As yer has got me foul, I has got to eat my words."

"Come, that will not do."

"Get down upon your knees, and then ask my pardon, quick, for I give you just half a minute to obey!"

"I does ask yer pardon."

"Down on your knees, I say!"

The desperado obeyed, uttering an oath as he did so, and said again:

"I axes yer pardon, durn yer."

"An right now go!"

"Not until I gits satisfaction."

"What satisfaction do you wish?"

"Ter fight yer."

"When?"

"Now."

"Where?"

"Here."

"What are your weapons?"

"Revolvers."

All right, go to yonder cabin and stand with your face to it, while I stand in like position here.

"Boss Pete Porter will give the word, and turn and kill me if you can."

It's agreed," and the man walked to the cabin, drawing his revolver as he did so.

Then Pete Porter gave the word, and both men wheeled and fired, but the desperado fell dead, a bullet between his eyes.

"Boss Porter, that man was Jack the Jayhawker, for a long while road-agent on the Overland."

"I have met him before," and the Masked Driver walked away, followed by a shout from the crowd at his nerve, and quick, deadly aim, which had rid the settlement of one of the worst men in it.

CHAPTER LIV.

MISSING.

THERE was no doubt but that the bold act of the Masked Driver had been appreciated by all, excepting perhaps a few kindred spirits of the dead desperado.

Jack Hawks, as he was called in the mines, had come there a little over a year before, and at once set to work to paint everything of a carmine hue.

What his record had been elsewhere nobody had appeared to know, but he was not very long in making a new one for himself.

His first achievement was to kill a driver of the Overland, upon whom he fastened a quarrel, and as the man he shot was a good one, in border parlance, it gave him a name as one whom it was dangerous to set going.

He drank heavily, gambled, cheated and was suspected of a number of crimes, which no one appeared bold enough to fasten upon him with proof which they had of his guilt, for he had a "gang" that were at his beck and call and scarcely less terrors than he was.

He had sought trouble with the Masked Driver for no other purpose than to kill him and thus add to his record.

He had been angered at seeing his masked face, and to gratify his curiosity intended to tear it off.

So he had insulted the driver and expecting a quarrel had been, by the quick action of the insulted man, caught wholly off his guard.

Cowed in a measure, he dared not let it go at that, an apology on his knees from him, and so had demanded satisfaction with a quick acceptance of the challenge and a result which the reader has seen.

All present, when the Masked Driver mentioned the name of Jack the Jayhawker, knew of the terror of the Overland trails eastward, who had been known by that name.

He had a price upon his head, and giving up the road-agent business had been supposed to be dead.

When the Masked Driver walked away several of those present, who had seen and known the Jayhawker, verified the statement, a miner saying:

"Yes, that's the man, for I recognize him now, though he had no beard then and wore his hair short."

"He robbed the coach I was on and got my money too, though it was not much."

"If it's Jack the Jayhawker he has a skull and crossbones pricked in black upon his right arm above the elbow, and his initials beneath, J. H., for his name was Jay Hawks, and that is what he made up his name of Jack the Jayhawker from," one of the Overland drivers said.

The sleeve of the dead man was drawn up and there was revealed the device spoken of and the two letters.

"The Masked Driver was right," said another of the party.

"Yes, and he had better look out for Jack's band, for they will kill him."

"He seems like one who can take care of himself."

"Yes, but they are many, fully a dozen of them, and he is but one."

"Well, he hev done this settlement a big favor in calling in Jack's chips."

"You bet he has, and I moves we men who respects ourselves stands by the stranger."

"So does I."

"He got onter Jack mighty sudden."

"You bet he did, and if his face is hid his eyes is open."

"And don't he shoot?"

"He do for a fact."

So the conversation ran on until Pete Porter said:

"Well, pards, there is no doubt but that he has got it down fine with this man here, and my idea is that we must back him up ag in ther gang."

"So say we all of us," came from a number present, and then the crowd dispersed, while Pete Porter pinned up on The Wayside a placard which he had just written, and which read as follows:

WARNING.

Let it be known to all that the Masked Driver shot and killed in fair combat, Jack Hawks, alias Jack the Jayhawker, and in doing so rid the settlement of a man who has been a terror in it, and who, with his gang, has done many lawless acts.

If the gang of the said Jayhawker now attempts any funny business toward the Masked Driver, to put him out of the way they are warned that every known member of the band will be strung up without trial.

By order of
"CAPTAIN OF VIGILANTES."

"That will protect him," said Pete Por-

ter, who was determined not to lose by assassination the only man who would dare take a coach out over the Fatal Trail.

To his amazement, when he sent his breakfast to the Masked Driver the next morning, the Chinese servant reported to Pete Porter:

"No Hidee face man in roomee.

"No sleepee in bed—gone allee samee."

A search was at once instituted for the Masked Driver, but he was found to be certainly missing, and foul play was at once suspected, and the gang of the Jayhawker were supposed to be the guilty ones.

CHAPTER LV.

DOOMED.

THERE were several of the "Devil's Own," as Jack Hawk's gang was called, and with reason, who had read the placard hanging up in front of The Wayside.

They felt that the Vigilantes would be as good as their word, that the threat would be carried out, and they gave up all idea of avenging their leader's death against the Masked Driver, at least not then.

There were one or two of the most desperate of the gang who vowed that they would get the Masked Driver into a personal quarrel and kill him, and the Vigilantes certainly would not punish them for that.

The drivers of the Overland, who had their headquarters at Trail End City were, to a man, with the unknown man of the mask.

They gloried in his grit and wanted to know him better.

He did not appear in the saloons that night, and when, the next morning, the rumor went through the camps that the Masked Driver had not stayed in his room all night, there were those of the Devil's Own band who stood not on the order of going, but went at once.

They knew what an infuriated frontier mob was to arouse, and if harm had befallen the Masked Driver, then they would be suspected of foul play, and a suspicion in the minds of that people was equivalent to a verdict of "guilty in the first degree."

So these few, with faces blanched for fear they could not shake the dust of the camps of Trail End City off their shoes quick enough, packed up their very small belongings and skipped for safer fields of action, at least to themselves.

The search for the Masked Driver having proven fruitless, no one having seen him since he walked away from The Wayside, after his fatal duel with Jack Hawks, Pete Porter at once called upon the Vigilantes to make search for the members of the desperado's band, the Devil's Own.

The gang were known to muster nine men, including their leader, but the most diligent search only brought out of their hiding-places five.

These five were put in the log lock-up, designated by courtesy "The Jail," to await further search for the missing man, the Masked Driver of the Fatal Trail.

The other drivers constituted themselves into a searching party, and went in squads here, there and everywhere about Trail End City.

But without favorable result was their search.

"Keep the Devil's Own until the night before the day when the coach goes out, and if the Masked Driver is not found then we'll hang them," was the decision of Pete Porter, and his word was law.

Then he added:

"If we don't hit the guilty ones on that count, we'll hit them on half-a-dozen others and the devil will get his own, so there will be no harm done."

Such was the decision regarding the followers of Jack Hawks, against men who had been a threat and terror to the settlement for a long while and who had held the people cowed, even the bravest men not caring to fight one of them, knowing that he would have the whole pack upon him if he killed the one he fought with.

In their prison, and in the charges against them there was no sympathy shown by any one, and the decision of Pete Porter and others of the Vigilante Committee, that they

must hang if the Masked Driver did not turn up, was universally approved.

There were a few men who hoped that the Masked Driver would not turn up, so that the remnant of the Devil's Own Band would be hanged.

At last the drivers gave up the search for their missing confrere of the reins, and it came to be a settled thing that the five men in the lock-up must die.

The night came round only too soon for them, which was the limit given them, and when it neared sunset they were brought out of their prison, a wretched, cowering lot, feeling themselves the horrors they had made others feel.

The Masked Driver had not returned, and the morrow was the day for him to take out the coach over the Fatal Trail.

A small sachel, with some changes of clothing in it, had been left in his room, and this was proof that he had intended to return, at least to the minds of many.

A vast crowd had gathered to see the execution, and as the sun touched the mountain horizon, Pete Porter called out:

"Time! Say your prayers, men, for I give the word to go in just one minute!" and he had his watch in his hand.

The five men stood on a plank put across the top of a coach. Their hands were bound behind them, while about their necks were ropes, passed over a young tree cut off, and put across the branches of two oaks.

There sat upon the box of the coach two drivers, one holding the reins over six horses, the team of the Masked Driver.

The coach was also that of the Mysterious Driver, the vehicle which had won the name of the Fatal Coach.

Lustily the doomed wretches begged for mercy, but in vain, for there was no mercy in that crowd for them.

"Time!" again called Pete Porter, and then followed the words:

"All ready!"

"Go!"

The whip cracked, a yell to the horses from each driver, and the animals bounded forward, dragging the five doomed men off the plank on top of the coach, and left them dangling in the air.

The next morning at sunrise a tall form strode by the still swinging forms, glanced at them an instant, and then stepping up to Pete Porter, who stood at the door of The Wayside, said:

"I am ready to take the coach out, sir."

It was the Masked Driver!

CHAPTER LVI.

FOXEY IN TROUBLE.

WHEN the Masked Driver left the relay station, where he had seen Foxey, the "captain" of the stock-tenders, the latter stood gazing after him until the coach rolled out of sight.

Then they began to discuss his pluck and skill as a driver, until at last Foxey remarked:

"Wal, pards, it's my idee thet he's goin' ter travel ther Overland Trail once too often, for a man's a man, and a bullet will kill ther biggest and ther bravest of 'em, and some fine day he'll git thet piece o' lead right whar he lives."

"Now I doesn't know who he is no more do any of yer, and so we can't tell which one o' ther Overland drivers he be."

"But he's one of 'em, dead sart'in, ef he hain't—"

The "captain" paused, and the stock-tenders asked in chorus:

"Who, cap'n?"

"Buffalo Bill," was the complacent answer.

This seemed to strike the men as favorable, and the captain continued:

"Now Buffalo Bill are jist thet kind o' pilgrim ter drive ther coach when no other man would do it, and it's my idee he's ther man!"

"Ther Masked Driver be about Bill's size, cap'n," said one.

"Yas, and about his build," another said.

"Kinder looks like him too," the third remarked.

"Wal, ef it hain't Buffalo Bill it's his double, is all I has ter say."

"But I must be off, for I has ter git back on time, as ther boys will be anxious."

And so Captain Foxey mounted his horse and rode slowly away up the trail.

He had gotten to the spot where Brighton had been killed, and was gazing with considerable interest at the scene, little dreaming of danger to himself, when he heard the startling words:

"Both hands up, pard, or I pulls trigger!"

Foxy turned deadly pale, for he saw that he was fairly caught.

There, just to one side of him, was a bowlder, and leaning over it, his rifle resting upon the top, his eye running along the barrel, was a man.

Who that man was he could not tell, for the face was concealed by a red handkerchief tied around the head and holes neatly cut in it for the eyes.

The man was shabbily dressed, and his hair was long and matted, hanging on each side of his face like an old maid's curls.

But the rifle covered the heart of Foxey, and loving life he obeyed the command with alacrity.

Then the man came from behind the rock.

He had a blanket over him, the head thrust through a hole in the center, and he looked like one in hard luck.

"I wants yer guns first, pard, and yer knife."

With this he proceeded to take the belt of arms.

"Now I wants yer valuables."

"I hain't got none."

"Yer is dodgin' ther truth, fer here be a fine watch and chain, and I'll take thet ring, fer it may do ter give my gal, some day when I quits ther road-agent biz and turns honest."

"Come, I wants no nonsense, or yer goes ter grass with a bullet in yer."

Foxy groaned, but the robber was merciless, and he took the watch, chain and ring, and next struck him for his money.

Foxy was rather well supplied with money, but had to hand it over, though he swore by note at the robber for taking all he had.

The road-agent, however, appeared to really enjoy his fury, and made a business of getting all that he had, for he searched his pockets, made him pull his boots off, and found a leather case of money in one of them, and a few papers in the other.

"Now, pard, I guess I has about got all yer has o' value, so I'll say day-day to yer, and yer kin go yer way in sorrow, while I go mine rejoicin'."

"Yer were goin' up thet trail, so keep on, and if yer tarns back this way, yer is sart'in ter get a bullet."

"Git!"

Foxy needed no second bidding, but started off at a canter, swearing furiously, for never before in his life had he experienced the sensation of being held up and robbed.

He would have been glad to have gone back to the relay and gotten his men to go upon the trail of the road-agent, but, after the threat made if he turned back, he dared not do so.

Then he thought of going across the country to his station, which he could do, and not follow the stage trail around by Fort Rest; but he was unarmed, and he decided to go by the fort and report to Colonel Miles his having been held up and robbed, in the very spot where Brighton had been killed.

Having come to this determination he continued on at a rapid gallop for Fort Rest, still swearing at his ill-fortune in having been robbed, and muttering again and again to himself:

"I is a fool from 'Wayback, I is."

CHAPTER LVII.

PETE PORTER'S EXPLANATION.

WHEN the Masked Driver walked away from The Wayside, after his duel with Jack Hawks, he strolled about the settlement until it was dark, and then descending the hill crossed the stream upon the log bridge that spanned it, and went on up the stage-trail into the mountains.

He held on for several miles, until he came to a ridge, and here he turned off, following it to the left.

There was no trail along the ridge but he seemed to know where he was going, for he did not halt until suddenly he heard a low whistle.

He stopped short and answered it by three sharp whistles.

Then a man stepped out from the shadow of a tree ahead, and said:

"Glad to see you, pard, for I was getting a trifle anxious."

"I am all right," was the answer.

"Here are the horses, so we'll mount and get away from here as quickly as possible, for we must visit both camps you know, and we can travel only by night."

"Yes, and I must be back on the morning of the third day from this to take the coach out on the run."

"You'll get there on time, pard, never fear," was the answer.

And on the morning of the third day after his departure, and on time, the Masked Driver, as has been seen, marched up to The Wayside Hotel, and reported himself ready to Pete Porter to take out the coach.

"Lordy, pard, where in thunder have you been?" cried Pete in amazement.

"I get so little time to hunt that I took my rifle and went for a tramp through the mountains."

"And got lost, that's just about the size of it," cried Pete laughing.

"Well, sir, let it go at that."

"I see that you don't want to own up, but that's it I guess."

"But come in and have some breakfast, for it's an hour to starting time."

"I'll go to my room first, and fix up a little."

"All right, and when you come back I'll tell you something that will please you."

In a quarter of an hour the Masked Driver was back again, having freshened himself up, and pointing to the five swinging forms, Pete Porter said:

"Do you know who they are?"

"I confess that I do not."

"They are the Devil's Own, or all we could catch of them."

"And who are they?"

"You killed Jack Hawks the other day?"

"Jack the Jayhawker, you mean?"

"Yes; well those men up there are his gang, or five of them, for there were nine all told, and they were known as the Devil's Own."

"I see."

"What had they been doing, may I ask?"

"Getting away with you."

"With me?"

"Yes, we knew they intended to kill you, and so I placarded a warning that they would be hanged by the Vigilantes, if any harm befell you."

"And then?"

"Fearing accidents, three of the gang, whose heads were serenely level, lit out for other parts, but those five remained and took chances."

"It was the greatest mistake of their life, as you can readily see."

"It looks so surely."

"But what did they do to be hanged?"

"Since you have returned I see that they were not guilty as indicated, for the charge against them was that they had murdered you."

"But, Pard Porter, I am safe and well as you see, and you should have waited."

"I did wait, for I gave them up to sunset last night, and as you did not appear, I gave the order to hang them, standing them in a row on a plank put across the top of your coach, and with your team to do the pulling, while I gave the word to go."

"My dear, sir, you have made a sad mistake," earnestly said the Masked Driver.

"Not in the least."

"You hanged those men for murdering me."

"Yes, presumably so."

"Here I am alive, so they were not guilty."

"On circumstantial evidence they were, and that goes, out here."

"They intended to kill you, and their intention was not carried out."

"But, sir, those men were innocent."

"Nothing of the kind, for they were every one of them thieves and murderers, and if not guilty on that charge, killing you, were guilty on a dozen others, so don't let that

trouble you, for it does not worry me in the slightest degree, and we got rid of a nest of serpents, don't you see?"

The Masked Driver saw that though a mistake had been made no regret was felt in the settlement, so he was convinced that the men must have richly deserved hanging anyhow.

"Well, Mr. Porter, I must thank you for your kind intention to avenge me at least, and, as the comrades of Jack the Jayhawk, they were doubtless very hard citizens, so I will not go into mourning for them."

"Now I'll get breakfast, and then it is Ho for Fort Famine over the Fatal Trail."

CHAPTER LVIII.

BACK TO FORT REST.

OUT of Trail End City went the Masked Driver, halting when he got well up into the mountains, and again entering his coach, as upon former occasions.

When he got out, some fifteen minutes after, the coach was, as before, closed up completely.

The relays were passed with a halt only long enough to change the horses, and on to the fort went the coach, arriving a little ahead of time.

To see the Masked Driver come in on the box safe and sound, after Brighton's death, to have gone to Trail End City and back without being killed, drove the soldiers wild with enthusiasm, and they cheered him to the echo.

He gave the mail over to the postmaster, handed Gill, the stage boss, a letter for him from Pete Porter, and went up to headquarters with a special dispatch handed to him by the stage-driver from the east.

The colonel was not at his quarters, had gone for a ride, it was said, so he left the package with the adjutant and returned to his cabin.

When Pete Porter's letter was read by Gill, that worthy went at once to headquarters.

The colonel had just arrived, and the stage-master had quite a long talk with him.

Then the colonel sent for the Masked Driver.

He was greeted cordially and asked about his run to Trail End City and back, and told his story, but said no more.

Then the colonel asked:

"Did you not have some trouble in Trail End City?"

"Yes, sir, but it did not amount to much."

"A man was killed, however?"

"Yes, sir, I was accused of hiding my face under a mask, as I was really the murderer of the drivers and robber of the coaches."

"I resented the charge naturally, sir, and I recognized the man as a road-agent leader I had seen before."

"I made him apologize, then, as he demanded satisfaction, I gave it to him, and that was the whole affair, sir."

"The man was Jack the Jayhawker?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is a reward on his head of two thousand dollars, and it was deposited with the paymaster to be paid to the one who killed or captured him, and Pete Porter has sent a request that the money be paid to you, and it shall be done."

"Pardon me, Colonel Miles, but I do not accept blood-money, so will have the paymaster turn it over to the families of the drivers killed upon the Fatal Trail."

"This is certainly very noble of you, my unknown friend, and, if you refuse the money, it shall go as you direct."

"I would like it to go that way, sir."

"Now I also learn that you left Trail End City after you arrived there, and that you were thought to have been killed by this Jayhawker's band, and five of them were hanged for your supposed murder from the top of your coach."

"Yes, sir, it was a case of circumstantial evidence which has caused many an innocent man and woman to suffer, though my murder was about the only crime, I believe, those men were not guilty of."

"So the hanging was not amiss?"

"By no means, sir."

"Well, Porter made his report to Stage-

master Gill, who in turn came to me with it, and I find you are as modest as you are brave, sir; a very rare combination, I may add."

The Masked Driver bowed in silence, and the colonel went on:

"You know, of course, the boss of the stock tenders at the relay corrals?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Well, he was held up on his way from Number Two, and robbed of all he had."

"He came here to report it to me, and pleaded pitifully for me to let him take a hundred troopers and hunt down the robber."

"Yes, sir, he was held up at the very spot where Brighton was killed."

"Ah! you know of the affair, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have seen the man Fox since he was robbed?"

"No, sir."

"But his men told you?"

"No, sir."

"May I ask, then, how you learned of the robbery of Fox?"

"I am not at liberty to tell just now, sir; but you will soon know."

"You surprise me, sir."

"I am sorry not to be able to make known the facts, Colonel Miles, but I will do so before very long, and it will be a satisfactory explanation to you, I am sure."

"Now, sir, have you any dispatches for Fort Famine?"

"I will send a letter to Major Dean, and have it ready for you in the morning, and with this the Masked Driver returned to his cabin, leaving the colonel more and more impressed with the unknown man, whom he yet had a faint suspicion was Buffalo Bill."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE SAME TACTICS.

As had become the custom now, the Fatal Coach, with the Masked Driver on the box, went out of Fort Rest in a whirl of glory, followed by cheer after cheer, for it had begun to appear as though the unknown had broken up the killing epidemic inaugurated by the Mysterious Murderers of Death's Canyon.

It was also known through the fort of the duel the Masked Driver had fought in Trail End City, and that he had sent his bullet directly between the eyes of the outlaw, while, refusing the blood-money, as the reward of a life was called, he had turned it over to the families of his slain comrades of the reins.

With these things in his favor, added to his being already a hero, and more, still unknown, there was no wonder that he was regarded with respect and friendly regard by one and all.

At the stream he halted to go through the same tactics of entering the coach, and then closing it, and when he came to the Death's Canyon it was the same draw down to a slow walk, the rifle across his knees, the revolver on the seat by his side.

Then a short halt was made in the open space, and on the coach went once more toward Fort Famine.

Foxy was at Relay Number Four when he drove up, and he had a piteous story to tell of his being held up.

"The colonel told me about it, Foxy," said the Masked Driver, and yet he listened attentively to the story of the stock-tender.

"It shows that thar be road-agents still around, don't it, Masked Pard?"

"It does, and I only hope they'll hold up my coach some day, for this driving without danger is getting monotonous."

"Yer don't mean thet yer wants ter be held up?" asked Foxy, in amazement.

"I do."

"Yer'll sing a different tune when yer gits thar."

"I'll sing a tune in which they can join me in the chorus," was the complacent reply.

Then the Masked Driver asked:

"What did they get from you Fox?"

"My watch and chain I prized highly, a ring a pard give me, some papers thet were of value ter me, but nobody else, and some few hundreds in money."

"Quite a haul, indeed; but I must be off," and the driver went on his way.

Major Dean was awaiting his arrival with feverish impatience, wondering if he would have any more news to tell of his child, and told the stage boss to send him at once to his quarters on his arrival.

Receiving the message the Masked Driver went directly to headquarters, and the major told him that the scouts reported the Indians moving to the northward, instead of eastward, against the forts.

"Keep that much closer watch, sir, for they intend to double on you," was the earnest response of the Masked Driver.

"I will do so, and I will send back by you the full report received by the scouts from my command; but now tell me if you have any news of my child?"

"I can only reiterate what I have said, Major Dean, that she is safe and well, and that you will hear good news of her in time, but just yet her rescue cannot be attempted.

"More, I regret to say, I cannot make known to you."

"I can ask no more."

"So that I have your word for it that she is safe and well, I must be content."

"But the sergeant's wife?"

"Is with her, sir."

"Ah! this is gratifying; but that poor young soldier, whoever he may be?"

"Is also with her, sir, and the three will live or perish together."

"I must be content then to leave all in your hands, for I feel that you are doing your best, all that man can do."

"I am, sir, and I am not alone in the good work, I assure you, for others are doing more than I possibly can, hampered as I am by stage-driving, though it is a means to an end."

"You have not been molested?"

"No, sir."

"Not even upon the Trail End City run where Brighton lost his life since you have been driving?"

"Not on the trail, sir, anywhere."

"But let me urge that you keep on the watch most closely, for the red skins intend a rush, and will do all in their power to crush out both forts."

"We will not be caught napping, I pledge you."

At the time of starting the next morning, punctual to the minute, the Masked Driver drove out of Fort Famine, and having halted and closed his coach, some miles out, he muttered to himself as he again mounted to the box and drove on:

"Somehow I feel as though something was going to happen on this trip, and my presentiments are seldom wrong, I have found by experience."

CHAPTER LX.

FOUR SHOTS.

THE presentiment felt by the Masked Driver kept him more on the alert than usual.

He had to halt a little longer at the first relay he came to, as one of the men had been kicked by a horse and was laid up, and another had gone on a hunt for game.

Reaching the Death's Canyon he let his horses walk as usual, and as he entered the open space was about to draw rein, when suddenly one, two shots rung out, and the Masked Driver fell back upon his coach as though shot through brain and heart.

Then from among the rocks sprung two men, wearing masks, and as they rapidly approached the coach, their weapons in their hands, suddenly and unexpectedly, without rising from his side, as he had fallen over on the box, the Masked Driver fired two shots.

There was no mistake this time, for the two masked road-agents dropped dead in their tracks, a bullet through the brain of each.

Then the Masked Driver dismounted from his box, with no show of being hurt, approached first one man, then the other, and raising the mask of each glanced fixedly at the faces thus exposed.

He made no remark, but mounting to his box drove on once more, and still on the alert.

As he left the Death's Canyon he muttered to himself:

"My presentiment was right."

"Something did happen."

Driving up to the Relay Number Three he was met by Foxey, who had heard the stage horn.

Foxey looked very disconsolate since his having been held up, and said:

"Waal, pard, through ag'in safe, I sees?"

"Yes, Foxey, but there have been two more sudden deaths in the canyon."

Foxey started and said:

"What! yer hed passengers kilt?"

"Oh, no, for I had no passengers; but I was fired upon; see, here is one shot through my sombrero and you observe this cut in my coat on my left side, where the bullets gave me a close call."

"The devil!"

"I told you that somebody would go under when they fired on me."

"Yer kilt them?"

"Yes, and left them lying in the canyon for their comrades to bury, for they must be near."

"As they wore masks, of course I could not see who they were."

"Waal, I'll be darned!"

"You do beat all I ever seen, Masked Pard."

"If you could scout back that way, Foxey, maybe you would see where their comrades buried them and find out who they are."

"I'll do it. I'll go at once, and report to yer upon yer next run through."

"All right, good-by," and the Masked Driver drove on.

He drove into Fort Rest ahead of time, but as calmly as though nothing had happened, and only when he had dismounted, said:

"Mr. Gill, come with me to Colonel Miles, for I have a report to make to him."

Gill was surprised, and all seeing him go to headquarters with the Masked Driver, at once surmised that something out of the usual routine had happened.

The colonel had them admitted at once, and the driver handed to him the letter from Major Dean, which he did not then read, but said:

"Well, Sir Unknown, you have news evidently for me, as I have for you."

"I wish to report, Colonel Miles, that I was fired upon twice in Death's Canyon—see, here is one shot through my sombrero, and here is another in my coat on the left side."

"What! you are wounded?"

"Fortunately, I was not, sir, but their intention was to kill."

"And you outran them with your team?"

"Oh no, sir, I played 'possum, dropping over on my box as though dead, which brought them out of their hiding-places, and I shot them."

"Killed them?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Well?"

"I drove on and told Foxey to scout back and see where their comrades buried them."

"I will send a party at once to the spot, and see."

"On the contrary, sir, please do not, for I wish to go right on to Trail End City to-night, with Mr. Gill's permission?"

"Why so?" asked Gill.

"I can only explain, sir, that an attack by red-skins threatens the fort, and I brought out considerable treasure this time from Fort Famine, as well as valuable mail, so I desire to get it safe in Trail End City as soon as possible, for then I have several days off, before starting again."

"Yes, Gill, let him start."

"Certainly, sir."

"And, Mr. Gill, if you will kindly have the best team hitched at once to the coach, you will oblige me," said the Masked Driver, and the stage-master started off to obey, while Colonel Miles said:

"I wish to tell you, sir, that the scouts send in word that the red-skins are moving, villages and all, northward, so have given up their proposed raid, perhaps discovering we were prepared for them."

"No, colonel, that is a blind, I am sure, for they will halt their villages, and sweep around with the warriors to attack you in the rear, take my word on that, sir, and be more than ever on the alert."

"I will," was the colonel's emphatic response.

CHAPTER LXI.

A SHOT AT RANDOM.

THERE was quite a stir in the fort when they saw the coach roll away toward Trail End City after a half hour's halt, instead of waiting until the next morning.

"I can pass the second relay before dark, and reach Trail End City by midnight," mused the Masked Driver as he went on his way.

He had gone but half a dozen miles when he suddenly caught sight of an object moving far ahead.

He fixed his eyes upon it, yet did not appear to notice it.

"An Indian, as I am a sinner, and hiding from me."

"He means no mischief to me, only does not wish to be seen."

"Ah! he has lain down behind that rock, and will peep through that clump of bushes at me."

"I'll give him a shot at random, and if I miss him, catch him with another on the jump."

"He is scouting here for no good."

The coach rolled on as though nothing had been discovered by the driver to threaten danger, and when passing the little bush growing in a crevice of the rocks, the Masked Driver suddenly raised his rifle and fired.

A yell followed, and a red-skin rolled over the rock to a grassy plot ten feet below.

Instantly putting on the brake, the Masked Driver leaped from his box and approached the Indian, who was writhing in pain.

Suddenly he stopped and called out:

"What! is it my red brother, the Winnebago chief Many Hair?"

"Did my brother intend to kill me, for I am his pale-face brother the Healing Hand—see!" and kneeling by the dying red-skin he held his face close down and raised his mask so that the eyes of the Indian alone could see it.

"My pale-face brother speaks with a straight tongue—he is the Healing Hand, and he has killed his red brother the Many Hair," was the low reply, for the Indian was dying, and clutched his hand in his mass of waving hair, which was most strangely marked, as there were white, brown and red-dish locks in it, hence his name.

"The Many Hair is here to kill my people, forgetting, since he left his own people and joined the Sioux, that he is the brother of the pale face."

"He is seeking to become a great chief among their people, and has come here to scout, and lead them by night upon the forts, to kill and to rob."

"Is this the teaching of the Healing Hand to his red brother?"

"Has his red brother forgotten all?"

The words moved the Indian greatly, even more than did the pain he suffered.

He was a splendid specimen of manhood, tall, muscular, and with a noble face.

After a moment of silence the Indian chief said in a low, earnest tone, and in good English:

"The Many Hair is wrong."

"He has a bad heart to forget the teachings of his white brother the Healing Hand."

"But he is dying, so can do no harm, for soon he will be upon the trail to the happy hunting-grounds."

"The Many Hair can do good, he can make the heart of his white brother glad, for he can tell him of the red foes that are coming to kill his people."

Again the chief was silent for some minutes, and then he said:

"The Many Hair loves his white brother, and he will talk."

And leaning close to him the Masked Driver listened to all that the Indian, under his questioning, said to him.

The voice of the red-skin grew fainter and fainter, and at last, with a convulsive start his life was ended.

Instantly the Masked Driver arose, took up the form, as he might that of a child, and carried it to the coach, placing it in it.

Then mounting the box he drove on in the gathering gloom, until he reached the scene of Brighton's murder.

Then he halted and gave three long, shrill, ringing whistles.

They were answered promptly from near by, and a moment after a form appeared coming down the side of the hill.

The Masked Driver met the stranger, there was a short talk between them, and then the Indian was quickly stripped of his costume, and his hair cut short off to his head, while the body was wrapped in a blanket, the rig of the red-skin and his weapons in another, which was tied up securely.

"Now get your horse for me to ride back, while I dig a grave for poor Many Hair," said the Masked Driver.

The other disappeared, and when he returned, riding his horse, the grave was nearly dug in the soft ground.

"Now you know our plans, agreed upon, so I will return at once to the fort," and mounting the other's horse, after strapping the blanket containing the Indian's outfit on behind, the Masked Driver rode rapidly back on the trail, his companion driving the coach toward Trail End City, and going at a very live pace, too.

"Ho, Buckskin Charlie, what's up, thet you is drivin' ther old huss, and coming ter-night, when yer hain't due ontill ter-morrer?" called out one of the stockmen, as they came out to see what the coach had come by night for.

"Oh, the Masked Driver was shot at in Death's Canyon, to-day, and though he brought down his game, they hit him, too, so I'm driving this run."

Oh, that's it; but why go through at night?"

"To catch the morning coach out of Trail End City, to send by it important dispatches."

"I see."

The fresh horses were soon hitched in, and away went Buckskin Charlie, the scout, driving with great skill, for he had driven stage before.

He passed the second relay, to the surprise of the stock-tenders there, telling them the same story, and a few miles beyond halted and gave the same signal which the Masked Driver had given to call him.

The signal was promptly answered, and Buffalo Bill was the one who appeared.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE MASKED DRIVER'S TIDINGS.

"Ho, chief, I have news for you," cried Buckskin Charlie, as he sprung from his box, and the two held a conversation of some minutes together, when Buffalo Bill said:

"All right, Buckskin Charlie, I will meet him at the place named, and when you have left the coach at Trail End City, do you go at once and notify Lieutenant Moore, and your own party, leaving one man in each camp, and coming with the others up to Precipice Pass."

"Yes, sir, we'll be there on time, never fear," responded Buckskin Charlie, and he drove rapidly on once more.

Just at midnight the people of Trail End City were startled by hearing the coach dash up to the door of The Wayside Hotel, and when Pete Porter rushed out to see what one it could be, he cried excitedly:

"The Fatal Coach! and Buckskin Charlie the scout driving it!"

This statement created a stampede for the door of the saloon, where many were gathered, drinking, gambling and chatting together as inclination or circumstances prompted.

"Pard Porter, I was ordered to bring the coach in, and it carries considerable booty in the way of dust," said Buckskin Charlie in a whisper to the stage boss.

"What! the Masked Driver has been killed then?" cried Pete Porter.

"Not a bit of it, though they tackled him in Death's Canyon."

"With what result?"

"He killed both of 'em, but each one hit him, and so he lays off until ther next run."

"Buckskin Charlie, you bring me great news, for I would not have that game fellow go under for my weight in dust."

"Where is he?"

"I brought the coach on the trail from Fort Rest, and shall go back at once, if you'll give me a horse, for the Masked Driver will be on hand to take ther next run."

"I'm glad to hear this, and I'll give you the horse, one of my own; but you better stay all night."

"Can't do it, thank you, boss, for I have to get back."

"Anything important?"

"Watching red-skins—that's our trade you know."

"Well, have some supper while your horse is being saddled," and having locked up the valuable packages coming through on the coach, Pete Porter led Buckskin Charlie to the supper-room where he had a substantial meal set before him, and which the handsome and dashing scout did full justice to.

Then his horse being ready, he went out to the stable-yard to mount and was soon going back over the trail, but which he branched off of before reaching the first relay, going to the left, and keeping up a brisk pace.

In the mean time, mounted upon Buckskin Charlie's horse, the Masked Driver had ridden with full speed back to Fort Rest.

He was challenged by the sentinel, but dismounted, and advancing showed him who he was, and was at once admitted, when he went to headquarters.

The colonel sent the orderly to tell him to come right in, and as he entered, said:

"Ho, my Masked Friend, have you been fired upon again?"

"No, colonel, I did the firing this time, and I came back to tell you something of great importance."

The colonel saw that the mysterious man was in deep earnest, and said:

"Sit down and let me hear what you have to say."

"Well, sir, it was fortunate that I decided to go on to-night, for I saw a man skulking on the trail, and discovered that it was an Indian in hiding."

"An Indian?"

"Yes, sir, and I knew that he must be a scout, so I pretended not to have seen him, watched his hiding-place, and, as I passed fired at random."

"Before he could fire upon you?"

"He had no such intention, sir, for he was after bigger game."

"Ah!"

"He was mortally hit by my bullet, and springing from the box I ran upon him revolver in hand, when I recognized him as a Winnebago Sioux, my red brother as he called himself."

"He had left his tribe and gone to the Sioux, and hoping to win fame and position among them he had urged them to allow him to plan the campaign against the forts."

"So his plan was to go northward with the villages to a stronger position, a few miles above, and then leaving them, to circle around, come down through Precipice Pass, and rush upon Fort Rest at dawn, day after to-morrow morning."

"This is great news, sir, and you surprise me."

"I had saved that red-skin from being hanged, sir, I helped him, enriched him, and we had been on many a trail together, so when I appealed to him, in the end he confessed all."

"You believed him?"

"Yes, sir, wholly."

"I got from him that the Cheyennes were leading, the Sioux supporting, for after the attack upon Fort Rest, they were to lead upon Fort Famine."

"There are a thousand Cheyennes, and twelve hundred Sioux warriors, and they are all mounted upon picked ponies and well armed."

"They felt sure, or knew, that you had no scouts in the direction of their coming, and filing through Precipice Pass they can be upon you two hours after, and they have ponies carrying long pole and raw-hide ladders, for the Cheyennes to creep up and mount the stockade walls with, open the gates and have the Sioux charge in upon their ponies."

"It is a well planned attack, Colonel Miles."

The colonel's answer was a long whistle that expressed much.

CHAPTER LXIII.

HEEDING THE WARNING.

"It is indeed a well planned attack, sir, and your red brother shows that he is a very skillful general."

"If carried out, a thousand Indians mak-

ing their way in the early dawn up to the stockade, they would hardly be seen by the sentinels until too close to keep them off, and the result is appalling to think of, should the Sioux charge into the fort twelve hundred strong on horseback."

"But continue, sir, with what else you have to say?"

"I remained with the Many Hair until he died, sir, and then decided upon my plan, for I had asked him many questions to aid me in a certain idea I had formed for action."

"Some daring move upon your part, doubtless."

"It is dangerous, just in so far as the part is badly played."

"The Many Hair got his name from a very remarkable birthmark, for his hair is several colors, in distinctly divided patches, or tufts."

"It is snow white in one tuft, black as jet in the back of the head, and has a yellow and brown tuft as well."

"He was so proud of it that he never wore a head-dress, other than a beaded band about his head without feathers."

"Now he is just my size, and his features were regular, so that I can impersonate him to perfection, for I cut his hair off and to night shall sew it into the beaded band he wore about his head, and which I brought with his clothing and weapons with me."

"His horse is staked out, he told me, not very far from where I shot him, and I will go and get him."

"Yes, I see your intention now."

"It is to go to meet the Indians?"

"It is, sir."

"Impersonating the Indian chief, Many Hair?"

"Yes, sir."

"But about the language of the red-skins."

"I speak both the Cheyenne and Sioux languages perfectly, Colonel Miles."

"You will take a terrible risk."

"Not near so much as you imagine, sir, and let me tell you that to-morrow Buffalo Bill will be here."

"Ah! you have seen him then?"

"After the death of Many Hair, I drove on to a rendezvous, the spot where Brighton was killed, and a signal brought Buckskin Charlie to me."

"I told him what had occurred, ordered him to drive the coach on to Trail End City, while I returned to the fort."

"He was also to meet Buffalo Bill on the trail and have him go to a certain point to meet me, and I shall see him there at dawn, for he will help me make up as Many Hair."

"I am sure that Buffalo Bill will urge, as I do, sir, that the fight need not be here at the fort, but at Precipice Pass, where you can work your guns and ambush your infantry, having your cavalry in the rear to charge when the stampede begins."

"They can retreat but one way, and will doubtless attempt a stand at a point miles beyond, but they will find that already occupied I promise you, sir."

"You talk like a soldier, sir."

"Thank you, colonel, it is my ambition to be a good soldier."

"I know this Precipice Pass well, and it is the very place for an ambush, as you say."

"I can send word to Major Dean to-night, to forward his cavalry to me here, with all haste, bringing one light gun, and with my force we can press the red-skins hard, for I will have fresh horses for Dean's men."

"I need have but a small force in the fort, and, if we are not as successful as we expect we can retreat upon the fort, and, warned as we are, the Indians would never dare attack us when prepared for them."

"Is that your idea of it, Sir Unknown?"

"It is, sir."

"Will you send a courier at once to Fort Famine?"

"I will send him so that he can reach Death's Canyon by dawn, for I hardly know a man who would go there at night, other than yourself and Cody, and he can get a fresh horse at the stage relay beyond, and reach Fort Famine by breakfast time."

"That will give the cavalry time to get here before sunset, when, with fresh horses and a short rest, they can go to Precipice Pass to join your force, sir."

"Yes; but do you go to-night?"

"Yes, sir, as soon as I have gotten some things from Cody's cabin, I shall return."

"Well, Sir Unknown, I must tell you that you have rendered most valuable services, and I fully appreciate them; but what will you say to the red-skins when you meet them?"

"I shall lead them, as Many Hair the chief, into the ambush you prepare for them, sir, for they need a very severe lesson, not seeming to have profited by the one you gave them a short while ago."

"But look out for yourself, for that pass will be a hot place, and bullets show no favors."

"Oh, I'll look out for myself, sir," was the laughing reply, and twenty minutes after the Masked Driver was on the trail to his rendezvous with Buffalo Bill, again mounted upon Buckskin Charlie's horse.

Half an hour later a scout started for Fort Famine with dispatches for Major Dean.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE MEETING OF THE PARDS.

WHEN the Masked Driver arrived at the spot where he had shot Many Hair, he branched off to the right, and after a short search in the darkness, found the Indian's horse staked out in a hollow.

He gathered up the saddle and bridle, and taking the horse in lead, rode on to the place appointed for his rendezvous with Buffalo Bill, and to which spot he had told Buckskin Charlie to send him.

It was nearly dawn when he got there, and he was halted with the words:

"Ho, pard, I'm mighty glad to see you!"

"As I am to see you, Bill, for though I told Buckskin Charlie to tell you something of what had happened, I have a great deal to make known to you."

"Buckskin Charlie told me enough to convince me that you had struck a bonanza."

"I have."

"And he went on with the coach to Trail End City?"

"Yes, and is to then go after Lieutenant Moore and his party, and his own squad of scouts, and bring them to meet you, leaving one man in each camp."

"This will give, besides Lieutenant Moore and yourself, ten men, scouts and soldiers, and I will join you before you need open fire, so we will be thirteen, and to make the force seem larger, when you go to the fort to-day, bring back on a pack-animal a score of repeating rifles extra, with plenty of ammunition."

"The very idea."

"I will get three repeating-rifles apiece for us, besides those we have."

"We will be equal to a force of a hundred men, for I know your idea is to take possession of the Eagle Cliffs, to prevent the Indians from halting and rallying there."

"It is just that, and you seem well posted."

"Oh, I didn't take long to catch on that there was to be a surprise given the red-skins at Precipice Pass, where they expected to surprise the fort."

"That is the plan, Bill."

"It will paralyze them, pard."

"But Buckskin Charlie told me you got your information from an Indian you shot, your old friend, Many Hair."

"I did, and I'll tell you the whole story, and then we will go to our blankets for rest, as there is work for us to do to-morrow, and a great deal of it."

The story of Many Hair's death was told, and then the two pards turned in for the night.

After several hours' sleep they awoke refreshed, got breakfast, and then sat down to discuss the plan for the day and night.

With the skill of a seamstress the Masked Driver sewed the long, variegated locks of hair cut from the head of Many Hair, into the beaded band, and placing it upon his own head, it looked even by daylight like his own hair.

While he was doing this Buffalo Bill got out several little bottles the Masked Driver had brought with him, and which contained dark-red liquids.

These were small boxes of paints, some

brushes and other things to make up the full dress toilet of a chief out on the war-path.

The clothing of Many Hair was looked over carefully and tried on, and his weapons were put in good shape.

The weapons of the Masked Driver were placed on the saddle of Buckskin Charlie's horse, and, looking well ahead, the unknown man had, though with great repugnance, taken the scalp-lock of the dead chief, for his intention was to carry the scout's horse with him, and pretend to have killed him and captured the animal.

Of course the scalp would carry him out in this, for a yellow lock had been taken that would look as though coming from a pale-face's head.

"Now pard, I will paint you," said Buffalo Bill, and with the liquids, paints and brushes he began his artistic work, the Masked Driver having shaved his face clean for the operation.

The work took nearly two hours, but was most artistically done, and when the Masked Driver, clad in the costume of the Indian, mounted the red-skin's pony, he did look the counterpart of Many Hair himself.

Then the two pards shook hands warmly in parting, and with the horse of Buckskin Charlie in lead, the Masked Driver started northward on his perilous mission, his clothing and mask being rolled in a blanket and strapped behind his saddle.

"There goes as brave a man as ever drew the breath of life," said Buffalo Bill to himself, as he stood watching the disguised man ride away.

Then he leaped into his own saddle, put spurs to his horse and said:

"Come, old boy, it is a ten-mile ride to the fort and you have got to make it in an hour, so do not tarry by the way."

It was a few minutes under the hour when Buffalo Bill was ushered into the presence of Colonel Miles, for the chief of scouts knew how to ride hard and spare a horse at the same time.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE COLONEL AND THE SCOUT.

"WELL, Cody, you are a most welcome man, and I do not know whom I would rather see than you."

Such was the greeting of Colonel Miles to Buffalo Bill when the chief of scouts entered the room.

"I feel flattered, colonel, I assure you, and I hope what I can tell you will be satisfactory," was the scout's answer.

"Sit down and let me hear what you have to say."

"But first tell me if you met that remarkable Unknown?"

"I did, sir, or rather he came to the place of rendezvous which he had told Buckskin Charlie to send me to, a little before dawn."

"Then you know of all his discovery through the Winnebago chief Many Hair?"

"I do, sir, and it carries out my ideas that the Indians intended to make an attack upon the fort, only I did not suppose they would do so by a wide flank movement, and changing their villages to cause you to believe they had gone northward."

"Well, they are coming, twenty-two hundred strong."

"Yes, sir, and in both forts you have not a thousand men."

"We have ample, being forewarned, Cody."

"But what did you and the Masked Unknown agree upon?"

"I painted him all the colors of the rainbow this morning, sir, after he had dyed his skin, his face, hands, and his neck, with a brown liquid he has."

"He made a head-dress of Many Hair's locks, got on his costume, and went off to meet the red skins looking every inch a chief."

"He led Buckskin Charlie's horse, tying his own weapons upon the animal, and the scalp of Many Hair all served to show that he had killed a white scout."

"Will he be suspected? That is the dread I have."

"No, sir, never, for he knows how to out-Ingun a red-skin in all he does, and he would pass muster by day, while he is to meet them at night."

"It is desperate work though."

"True, sir, but my Unknown Pard, or as you called him, my Shadower, is the man to play the game to the end and win."

"I am most glad to hear you say so."

"He got the whole thing from the dying Many Hair as to just what he was to do, the names of the chiefs and all necessary information and when he was to meet them."

"What will he tell them, Cody?"

"That he has scouted about the fort, played the friendly Indian dodge, killed the white scout sent with him, and all is serene on this side of your position, with no barrier between them and the attack."

"He will send them on through Precipice Pass, in just time for them to reach the fort before dawn, should they continue on, and you will get them into a trap, sir, which will completely demoralize them."

"In retreating they would take position to check pursuit in the Eagle's Cliffs, but Lieutenant Moore and his four soldiers, Buckskin Charlie and five of his scouts, and the Masked Driver and myself will be there to drive them back and hasten them on in their flight."

"A very small force, Cody."

"I wish to get a couple of dozen repeating-rifles, sir, with ammunition, to carry with me, and that, with what we have with us, will give each man three guns, or forty-eight shots each, and that will make the red-skins believe we have considerable force stationed there."

"Then, too, a dozen men could hold the Eagle Cliffs against hundreds."

"You and your Unknown Cody, have certainly planned well."

"You shall have the guns and ammunition."

"But when do you start?"

"Very soon, sir, for we must get into position before nightfall."

"Is there no danger of other Indian scouts being out in advance of the main force?"

"We thought of that, sir, and the Unknown went ahead by day through Precipice Pass, and by Eagle Cliffs, to call all back with him, should he meet any, and as Many Hair he can do it, for they are depending upon the Winnebago chief in this raid, to lead them to success."

The scout then gave the colonel a map the Unknown had drawn hastily with pencil, with the positions of ambush for the infantry, and artillery to take, and where the cavalry could lie in wait until the time came for them to charge.

"I shall take six guns, two twelves and four sixes, and arm the artillerymen with rifles as well, which may come into use."

"There will be six companies of infantry, a trifle over three hundred strong, and five troops of cavalry, which will number two hundred men."

"There will be left in the fort a hundred soldiers, besides the cowboys and the hangers-on about the camp, and I have sent to Major Dean for some cavalry and a gun, for we must win at all hazards, Cody."

"Yes, sir, for defeat means death to all," was the emphatic reply of the scout.

CHAPTER LXVI.

TO THE FIELD.

BUFFALO BILL went away from Fort Rest leading a heavily-laden pack-horse, for he carried the extra rifles, ammunition and provisions for his party.

He rode as rapidly as he could, and came to the Precipice Pass while the sun was yet an hour high.

The pass was narrow from the fact that it was nothing more than a split, a chasm, dividing the mountain, with lofty precipices upon either side, and not over a hundred yards in width.

The center arose into a hill, and beyond this the walls narrowed and were broken, so that infantry could find lodgment on either side, the guns taking up position on the ridge, and commanding the narrow pass for a mile, or more.

At the entrance to the pass Buffalo Bill was confronted by Lieutenant Moore and Buckskin Charlie, who were awaiting him.

"Well, Cody, if this is the scene of ambush, it will be good-by Mister Lo this night of our Lord," called out Lieutenant Manning Moore, a handsome young officer who had won his spurs over and over again as an Indian-fighter.

"Yes, sir, and the general is going to bring every man he can spare.

"But let us ride on to our position, as it will be best to take a view of it by daylight."

"The Unknown, sir, said he would not let them move until nightfall, and would keep them at the river, three miles beyond Eagle's Cliffs."

"Good! then we can get into position there."

They then moved on and came up with the others, the scouts and soldiers, and all hastened forward, Buffalo Bill remarking:

"The Masked Driver met several Indian scouts here, for there is their trail, and he turned them back toward the main force."

It was just sunset when they came to Eagle's Cliffs, a spur of the mountain, around which the trail ran in half a circle, and with a river beyond the trail.

From the position the chief of scouts led them to, they could command the retreating force coming around the spur and after they had passed it for some distance.

They climbed up to their position, and had a long enough look by daylight to take in all its advantages.

The extra guns were unpacked, loaded, and each man was given two in addition to his own.

The horses were securely muzzled to prevent their betraying them by neighing, and the men ate supper and took up the positions assigned to them, while Lieutenant Moore, Buffalo Bill and Buckskin Charlie themselves went on duty to watch, letting the men sleep.

It was nine o'clock when Buffalo Bill suggested that he could go back to Precipice Pass and see if the troops were in position, and by flanking, if the Indians were coming, get back to his place again, going of course on foot.

He slipped out quietly, ran down the hill, took an Indian trot and kept it up until he came near the pass.

At first all was so silent that he feared the colonel had not gotten into position, but by going ahead cautiously he was suddenly confronted by one of his own scouts.

"It's you, chief; I thought I recognized you."

"Yes, Arizona Bob, here I am, and I suppose the colonel is in position?"

"Yes, sir, you'll find him up by the guns."

"This is going to be a bad night, sir, for red-skin raiders, I take it," said Arizona Bob.

"Yes," and the chief of scouts passed on, and was standing by Colonel Miles's side before his coming was observed.

Captain May was with the colonel, and in the faint light they both recognized the scout at the same time.

"What, Cody, you here?"

Has anything gone wrong?" quickly asked the colonel.

"No, sir, for we are in position at Eagle's Cliffs, and we will give an account of ourselves, I trust, sir."

"I know that you will."

"But should they attempt to leave a force in our position, to guard their retreat, and we have to fight for it, I thought I would come and say that they would not then come on, and it would be well to push the cavalry and artillery forward to attack them."

"I will do so, but I hope they will not find you out."

"I trust not, sir."

"Have you seen the Masked Driver?"

"Only the trails through this pass, sir, and there were the trails of Indian scouts whom he had turned back."

"I am glad of that."

"Did the troopers come from Fort Famine, sir?"

"Yes, and the gun."

"Then there is nothing to fear, sir."

"But I must get back," and at the same Indian trot the chief of scouts made his way back to Eagle Cliffs.

He had hardly gotten into the little fort when a low, rumbling sound was heard down the valley, and he said:

"They are coming."

"Now for red work this night."

CHAPTER LXVII.

AS A RED-SKIN CHIEF.

THE daring man who is known thus far to the reader only as the Masked Driver, and

The Unknown, was playing a very bold part when he went to meet the Indian trailers and impersonate the Winnebago chief, Many Hair.

He rode on his way, leading Buckskin Charlie's horse, which bore his weapons close at hand, if there came need to use them, and upon coming near the Precipice Pass, he saw two red-skin scouts awaiting him.

"Now comes the test, and I hope there are no more."

"Ah! I recognize one of those bucks as Fighting Elk, though he is young now."

"He is a Sioux, and the other is a Cheyenne."

"If they recognize that I am not Many Hair, then there will be two Indians booked for the happy hunting-grounds."

As he drew nearer, the pretended Many Hair called out:

"Why did the Fighting Elk and his Cheyenne brother come ahead on the trail when he knew that the Many Hair was here, that he did not wish the scouts to come?"

"The Fighting Elk was looking for scalps," was the sullen reply.

"See, the Many Hair has a pale-face scalp at his belt, and a horse and weapons."

"The Many Hair knows what is good for his adopted people, for the braves on the war-path."

"Let my brothers come back with me to the waiting braves, and to-night there will be hundreds of scalps to take."

"Let them go on and they will spoil all."

"The Many Hair knows."

The Fighting Elk and the Cheyenne were pleased with the sight of the scalp, the horse and the weapons, and the promise of the Many Hair, and so they turned back with him, happy in anticipation of what the night would bring forth for them and their red comrades.

Back around Eagle's Cliffs they went, and there they found two other Indian scouts, who were also turned back.

Some miles away from Eagle Cliffs, hiding away in a valley, were the combined Sioux and Cheyenne forces.

The scene was a strange one, for the ponies were staked out in straight rows, from one end of the valley to the other, and by each horse a brave lay upon his blanket, or sat smoking his pipe or looking to his arms.

There was a shallow stream in the center of the valley, the Cheyennes being upon one side, the Sioux upon the other.

There were at the head of the valley half a hundred chiefs of both tribes, all in consultation and patiently awaiting the return of the Many Hair, who was to lead them to certain victory, for they had confidence that he could do so.

The disguised man had so timed his arrival as not to run the gantlet of more eyes than were necessary in the daytime.

He arrived just as the twilight was falling, and it was dark when he rode up to the group of chiefs.

A glance at the valley as he came in sight of it, convinced him that the Many Hair had told the truth, that he had not overestimated the number of either Sioux or Cheyennes.

Pawnee Killer, was the head chief of the Sioux, and Single Eye, a much scarred red-skin veteran, was the big man among the Cheyennes, and the former the pretended Many Hair had seen before.

Riding up to them he dismounted, saluted in the Indian fashion, and calmly pointed to the scalplock and horse of Buckskin Charlie as evidence that he had been within the lines of the pale-faces.

He told them that he had been to the fort, as a friendly Indian, and had counted the soldiers, the horsemen (the cavalry) and the big wagon guns (artillery) and that the fort had not over four hundred braves to defend it.

He had seen but one pale-face scout in the direction they were going to the attack, and his scalp hung at his belt.

He would guide the red warriors through the Precipice Pass, where they could halt for rest, then move on toward the fort, and attack it just as the day was brightening.

The two chiefs listened to him with delight.

At last the Sioux were going to avenge themselves upon the whites, and the Chey-

ennes could kill and rob, to repay them for the sorrows they had known.

The sub-chiefs were called together and the movements made known, how the Cheyennes were to lead, all march to the Precipice Pass, halt for a rest, and then move on to the fort.

Arriving near, the Cheyennes were to leave their horses, the scale-ladders were to be taken on the shoulders of two braves, and the band were to creep upon their unsuspecting foes, climb the stockade wall, seize the big guns, open the gates and in would rush the mounted Sioux.

It was a grand scheme, and after the arrival of the supposed Many Hair, supper was had, and an hour after the word was given to move, and as silent as specters the red warriors started upon their red mission of death and destruction.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

It was an ordeal of deep suspense, when the little party upon the Eagle Cliffs knew that the head of the Indian column was right beneath their position.

They held a place which, if the Indians when defeated, could get possession of, they would be able to keep their stronghold there as a constant menace to the forts.

For in that position the red skins could retreat along the ridges, or could camp in the canyon and valleys beyond, so its importance can be readily realized by the reader, as a flank movement upon them would leave the enemy between the soldiers and the fort.

Thus was it most important to hold the Eagle Cliffs, and it was a gallant little band of thirteen who had thrown themselves there.

Should the Indians take possession of the stronghold upon their march to attack the fort, then the fight must at once be precipitated, for the defenders would beat them back, and the alarm thus given, Colonel Miles and his force must hasten on to the attack and hurl the red-skins back.

It would be thus a fierce battle in the valley, with the soldiers opposing an overwhelming force.

So all anxiously awaited the movements of the Indians.

A dark, silent mass of horsemen they filed by around the spur.

Above them the little band sat ready for the fray, their rifles ready at hand, the horses securely muzzled and not a word being spoken.

As there was only one way of reaching the position, on the side toward the Precipice Pass, the defenders were all in view there.

If a retreat began, then they could divide their force and fire down upon the heads of the Indians from the other side of the spur.

On went the huge black column, not a word being uttered, and the muffled tread of two thousand Indian ponies the only sound that reached the ears of the watchers.

To those on the cliff, they looked like some mighty black serpent winding its way along the valley.

As the rear of the column passed the suspense grew greater, for from that end would come those who were to take the cliffs, if it had been decided to do so before the retreat.

But, no, the Indians thought not of defeat, they did not intend to return by so long a way to their fastnesses.

They would go on through Precipice Pass, strike Fort Rest, sweep down the stage trail to Fort Famine, overwhelm that, and return across the country to their villages, laden with plunder, having hundreds of horses, many women and children captives and many scalps of soldiers and scouts.

It was a well planned raid and must not miscarry.

So the dark column, three miles in length, passed on, and the watchers gave a sigh of relief, for that meant a surprise for the red-skins, an ambush which placed them on a more equal footing with the numbers that had to oppose them.

It meant their being hurled back from the pass, a stampede of maddened braves, a howling, vengeful mass of humanity, a rally

at the cliffs to try and retrieve the day, a desperate fight there, and either death to the defenders or a splendid victory, for there too would the Indians meet with a surprise, almost as great as the first.

The column began to close up its ranks as it neared the Precipice Pass.

There was to be a halt in the pass for rest, to water their ponies and to give the braves a chance to make a midnight supper of cold buffalo meat, before the ride began on the other side of the range for Fort Rest.

A hundred ladders, two poles lashed together with rawhide, so that they could be readily placed against the stockade walls, were carried on the backs of ponies, and up these, over into the fort, half a thousand Indian warriors could climb in a couple of minutes, the guards could be cut down, the gates thrown open, the big guns seized, and before the surprised garrison had realized what was going on, the mounted Sioux, twelve hundred strong, could rush in and join their thousand Cheyenne allies, and the massacre would begin.

With such anticipations of bloodshed and plunder ahead of them, it was not to be wondered at that the marching column of red-skins should be happy.

"The head of the column must be near the pass now," said Buffalo Bill to Lieutenant Moore.

"Yes, we will not have long to wait," was the answer.

"Hark to that!" cried Buckskin Charlie, and a roar that shook the hills, and echoed among the cliffs like the discharge of a thousand heavy guns, told that the red skin column had marched into the ambush of Colonel Miles.

CHAPTER LXIX.

FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

COLONEL MILES was as serene as a May morn, while waiting for the struggle to come.

A gallant officer, a man who had faced death on many a field, a tried and able soldier, nothing disturbed him when duty called.

He had placed his guns across the pass on the ridge, and his infantry, over three hundred rifles, were stationed among the rocks upon either side in the rear of the artillery, and some of the men fifty feet above it.

Back in the valley out of sight were the cavalry, the men standing by their horses ready to mount, but holding their heads to prevent a neigh, when the Indian ponies came near.

"I cannot but fear for Moore, Cody and their men, they are so few," the colonel remarked to Captain May who stood by their side.

"I hope, sir, in the stampede that must come, the red-skins will not think of taking possession of the Eagle Cliffs, and then the fire of our people there will but drive them on the faster in their flight," answered the captain.

"I trust so."

"But then there is that gallant fellow the Masked Driver, for he is exposed to the most desperate danger."

"Somehow, Colonel Miles, I believe that man has a charmed life," replied Captain May.

"It surely looks so; but see, is that not some one coming up the hill?"

"Yes, sir, a scout."

It was Arizona Bob, and he came on at a trot, and silently, up to where the colonel stood leaning on the muzzle of a gun.

"They are coming, sir."

"You saw them, Arizona Bob?"

"Yes, sir, they are not a quarter of a mile away."

"Well, we are ready for them."

"Put the canvas up, men."

A long piece of canvas was stretched across the canyon, from gun to gun, so that when the Indians came up the hill it would look like the summit line, whereas the guns and men, relieved against the sky, would stand out in bold relief.

Then there was not a sound heard, and Colonel Miles, Captain May, several aides, with Arizona Bob and a couple of scouts, took position upon one side among the rocks, but where they could see through the pass when the fight began.

The low rumble of the hoofs grew louder and louder, and soon after the dark mass of red-skin humanity was visible coming up the rise in the center of the pass.

A whispered order from the colonel and the canvas blind was suddenly let fall, and loud rung out the command in the commandant's voice:

"Fire!"

There were seven bursts of flame from the top of the ridge, illumining the pass a long distance off, and revealing the mounted warriors looking ten times their number in the first glance at them.

"Now the infantry! fire!" commanded Colonel Miles, and three hundred rifles flashed forth, suddenly, a leaden hail into the crowded mass of braves and ponies, among whom the bursting shells from the guns were playing sad havoc.

One long, loud wail, rather than a war-cry, and the red-skin column surged backward, and then the retreat began, with a few random shots back at their foes.

The shells of the guns were sent after them for the half-mile they were in range, and then the cannons were drawn to one side for the order had gone forth for the cavalry to charge.

Captain May had hastily mounted, for he was to lead the troopers, and with the rattling of steel and cheers the mounted men swept by the guns to pursue the terrified red-skins.

Down the hill they thundered, and soon the cracking of carbines and revolvers was heard, demoniacal yells mingling with the cheers of the troopers.

Then there was a lull, broken by a loud volley far in the distance, and the colonel shouted:

"Bravo! Moore and Cody are at it."

"This night the Indians will long remember!"

The rattling of the rifles on Eagle Cliffs sounded as though a regiment was stationed there, and then, as it died away it told that the stampeded warriors had swept on by.

Fainter and fainter in the distance sounded the firing, and then Arizona Bob, splendidly mounted, was sent to recall the troopers.

Arizona Bob, with his scouts, was then to slowly follow the retreating army of red-skins, and see that they returned to their fastnesses in full force, excepting those left upon the field.

Then over the valley, strewn with dead, came Captain May and his troopers in the early morning light, and he reported that the Indians had attempted to seize Eagle Cliffs, but had been beaten off by the terrible fire of the little band of defenders, who, when he returned, had all mysteriously disappeared.

"They have not come here, so where are they?" asked the colonel anxiously.

That was a question no one could answer.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE MASKED DRIVER REAPPEARS.

THE ambush had dealt a bitter blow to Sioux and Cheyennes alike.

Precipice Pass was strewn with dead braves and ponies, and as far as the guns had sent their shells fallen warriors lay, either slain or wounded, their horses near them.

Then there was a space that was clear of dead, except here and there where a wounded brave or pony had fallen, and the spot where the cavalry had struck them was plainly visible.

Piled up on the steep path leading up to Eagle Cliffs, the dead lay thick.

There were heaps of slain warriors here, and no better evidence could be found of how the little band had done their duty.

There were scores of Indian warriors captured, and these were made to take their wounded on travois, their ponies being given them for the purpose, and start for their villages, after the army surgeons had dressed the wounds of the unfortunate red-skins.

No prisoners or wounded Indians were wanted at Fort Rest, for there was no accommodation for them, and in returning them to their people Colonel Miles was doing an act of humanity.

The dead were decently buried in the valley, while the dead and wounded soldiers,

for there were a number of each, were borne back to the fort, where there was great rejoicing over the victory, though tinged with sorrow for the slain.

The troopers from Fort Famine went back to their post, having won laurels by their gallantry, and to tell how the battle had been won with five to one against them, and that it was thought a long peace with the red-skins would follow the severe blow they had received.

The third day after the battle the fort had settled down to the even tenor of its way, the dead officers and soldiers had been buried, the wounded were being well cared for, and yet a cloud hung over all, for since the day of battle neither Lieutenant Moore or Buffalo Bill, or the men with them, had been seen.

Then, too, not a word had been heard by Colonel Miles of the Masked Driver.

He had certainly done his part, for he had led the Indians into the trap, which they had intended to spring upon their white foes.

He had, with Buffalo Bill, saved the fort from a surprise, perhaps from a massacre of its people.

But where was he?

Had he fallen on the field?

Or, had he been sent away by mistake among the wounded, to the Indian village?

In the latter case he would be quickly sacrificed, for the part he had played as Many Hair would cause him to die by the cruellest torture.

The cheat of the Indian's variegated hair, put upon the head of the white man, would be very quickly discovered, and Many Hair's locks would betray him as the one who had killed the Winnebago chief, and impersonated him, to lead the Sioux and Cheyennes into the ambush prepared for them.*

The afternoon of the third day following the fight in the pass, the sentinel startled all in the fort by calling out that the coach from Trail End City was in sight.

"Who was the driver?"

That was the natural question of all.

Nearer it came, and the officer of the day having run up into the watch-tower, with his field-glass, electrified all by the cry:

"The Masked Driver is on the box!"

Cheer after cheer went up, for it had become known what a part he had played in the Indian raid, and he was thought by many to be dead.

But, no, it was surely the Masked Driver, for he swept into the fort in his accustomed way, drew rein at the station, bowed courteously to the applause he received and said:

"Mr. Gill, no passengers this trip, but Express packages and a mail, considerable of it going to Fort Famine."

His manner was cool as ever, and after a few words with the stage boss he went directly to headquarters.

The colonel grasped him warmly by the hand and said:

"I really believed you were dead, my Masked Friend."

"Why should you, colonel?"

"You never reported after going into the Indian lines as the chief Many Hair, and after the battle Buffalo Bill, Lieutenant Moore and those with them mysteriously disappeared."

"Well, sir, I saw no reason to report, for, after playing Many Hair's part successfully, I set the red-skins on the march for the pass, slipped out of the line and went to Eagle Cliffs, where I was in the fight with those there."

"Then, as we were all upon a special secret duty we went back to our forts, and I reported at Trail End City in time to bring the coach through, sir."

"And Lieutenant Moore and Cody?"

"Are all right, sir, and I came to tell you that this run of the coach will, I hope, sir, reveal the secret of the Mysterious Murderers."

CHAPTER LXXI.

PICKING UP A PASSENGER.

THE Masked Driver held a long conversation with Colonel Miles that evening, and it appeared to be a most satisfactory one to the commandant.

The battle was talked over, and full credit

* The author has the headdress and scalp of Many Hair, given to him by the Masked Driver, along with many other valuable souvenirs of the Wild West.

given by the colonel for the part the Masked Driver had played in it.

Leaving the colonel's quarters he went to his cabin as was his wont, and reappeared only when it was time to take the coach out on the morrow.

He bowed right and left to his enthusiastic admirers, receipted for the Express packages and mail for Fort Famine, mounted to the box and was away, followed by a roar of cheers.

He went through the same tactics as before, of dismounting at the creek, getting into the coach, closing it up and driving on once more.

Then he halted at Relay Number Three and had a talk with Foxey about the great fight with the Indians.

"Whar was you, pard?" asked Foxey.

"I was keeping dark about that time."

"But tell me, Foxey, what about those dead men?"

"They say there were a heap of 'em kilt."

"No, I mean the men I killed in Death's Canyon, and you went down to see about?"

"Oh, them!"

"Why, I seen 'em take off ther dead."

"The outlaws?"

"Yas."

"Were there many of them?"

"I seen five."

Well, five won't last long if they hold me up again."

"No, I guesses not."

"But I hopes yer'll git through safe."

"I hope they will hold me up, Foxey," was the reply as the coach rolled on.

As the coach entered the Death's Canyon, the Masked Driver saw in the trail before him a man, standing with arms raised above his head, and his weapons upon the ground.

He drove up to him, his rifle ready, and called out:

"Well, pard, what is it?"

"I wants ter ride ter Fort Famine with yer?"

"You can do so on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Leave your weapons where you are, and get upon the box with me."

The man obeyed, to find a muzzle thrust into his face and hear the words:

"Hold out your hands!"

He obeyed, and instantly a pair of handcuffs were clasped upon the wrists.

"Say, pard, I—"

"Silence, for if I wrong you, I will make ample amends."

"Now I'll tie you to the seat."

This was quickly done, and then the Masked Driver dismounted and picked up the man's weapons.

"Now, my friend, I feel safe in journeying with you for a companion."

"I'm a honest man."

"I do not say that you are not, only the Death's Canyon is a mighty bad place to pick up one."

"I has business at the fort."

"You shall have ample time to transact it; but where did you come from?"

"I is a messenger, sent by some pards ter see Major Dean."

"Ah! that is it, is it," and talking to his passenger the Masked Driver drove on to the relay, when Murdock called out:

"Ho, pard, yer has got a passenger this time, has yer?"

"Yes, and I may wrong the gentleman, Murdock, but I met him in Death's Canyon and he wanted to ride."

"I have to be very cautious you know, who I pick up, so I put the bracelets on him until we reach the post."

"I see; but he looks all right."

"Doubtless he is, only I take no chances on this trail."

"You is right, pard; but wasn't that a big fight at the pass?"

"Yes, from all accounts it was a wipe-out for the red-skins," and the Masked Driver went on his way once more.

He reached Fort Famine on time, and his coming with a prisoner in irons created considerable stir.

But he hastily relieved him of his irons and said:

"Now, pard, you are free, and I hope you will pardon me for what I did."

"I am going to see Major Dean, and I will tell him that you desire to see him upon a most important matter."

"All right, pard, and I'd like ter go back on ther trail with you in the morning."

"You shall, my friend," and the Masked Driver went on to headquarters, and was most cordially received by Major Dean who said:

"What a splendid victory, Sir Unknown, and I know the splendid part you played in it, for my officers have told me."

"I am delighted to see you."

"I have a letter for you, sir, from Colonel Miles, and on the way here I picked up, in Death's Canyon, a passenger."

"I put him in irons, for I did not know what he might do, but he is here to see you, sir, and take my word for it he is here to ask ransom for your daughter, so, with your permission, I would like to hear his story, though not be seen."

"You shall, sir, you shall," said the major nervously, for the mention of the man's coming about his daughter almost unnerved him.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE STRANGER'S MISSION.

WHEN Major Dean admitted the stranger to an audience, he saw a large man, dressed in a well-worn miner's suit, and with long hair and full beard.

"Well, sir, you wish to see him, I learn?"

"Yes, pard—I means major, I does."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Toby Thorn, sir."

"Where are you from?"

"Originally from down Boston way, but I came out to the border ter make a fortune in the mines."

"You do not seem to have struck it rich yet, Mr. Toby Thorn?"

"Well, sir, I has and I hasn't."

"You see I had a mine in which there was paying dirt, and I bagged all I had and started for home on a visit, when I was held up by road-agents and robbed."

"Well?"

"They kinder thought I had a very rich lay-out and so they kept me prisoner in their camp until they could force me to tell where it was."

"I has been with 'em for months, and when I tells you thet they is ther Mysterious Murderers of Death's Canyon, you can know I hasn't been happy."

"What! you have been the prisoner of those wretches?"

"I has, major, and—"

"You escaped?"

"No indeedy, sir, nobody kin escape from them; but they let me go on a mission to you, promising to set me free if I made it all right."

"What was that mission?"

"Well, sir, they blindfolded me and took me mile after mile, and left me in Death's Canyon to await for the coach to come along."

"Then I was to tell you that your daughter, a sergeant's wife and a young soldier were held prisoners by the murderers and they demanded of you for their release just twenty thousand dollars."

"If you accept you was to send word by me, and then on the next trip of the stage to Famine, you was to send an officer with the money to Death's Canyon."

"There was to be spies watchin' and if more than one officer came, the murderers would not show up their prisoners."

"If he come squar' and fair with ther dust, twenty thousand dollars, ther' would be a man thar ter meet him and get ther ransom."

"There would be the prisoners with him, and I was to be with 'em too, and when ther coach come along, they was ter take it fer Fort Famine."

"Thet is ther leetle game they is playin', major, and if yer don't pay I is mighty sart'in thet yer darter will be kilt and others, too, includin' me, fer them devils hain't got no conscience, sir."

The major listened most attentively to all the man had said, and he responded:

"My poor man, you have my deepest sympathy in your misfortune, and you shall lose nothing for coming here as a messenger to me, I assure you."

"May I ask if you have seen my daughter?"

"I has, sir, for I has been near her and others."

"She is well, and the others?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and they hain't treated so very bad yet."

"The sergeant's wife she does ther cooking, and the young soldier cheers 'em up, and they gits along as well as can be expected, yer see."

"Did my daughter know that you were coming to me?"

"Lordy, yes, sir, and I nearly forgot ter give you this writing she gave me for you."

The major seized the bit of paper and read:

"MY OWN DEAR FATHER:—"

"At last our cruel captors have consented to take ransom for us, and they set the sum at twenty thousand dollars."

"Of course you will pay it and free us from this life of imprisonment and suspense."

"The bearer, Toby Thorn, you can trust fully, for he is a fellow unfortunate with the rest of us."

"I am in no danger of harm or death unless the ransom is not paid, and in that case I know not what these fiends will do."

"I am well, and so are the others."

"Your devoted daughter,"

"HORTENSE DEAN."

P. S. I have to slip this letter to Toby Thorn secretly."

The major, in his fullness of heart, arose and grasped the hand of the messenger, and said:

"I will thank you far more than in words, Thorn, when you return here with my daughter, I assure you."

"Now I must think over what you have told me, and to-morrow morning, you shall have my answer, so that you can return with the coach to Death's Canyon."

"Yes, sir, they'll be there waiting for me, and after blindfolding and tying of me they'll take me back to their secret den."

"All right, my orderly will see that you are well cared for to-night, and I will see you in the morning."

"If you only could give me a lift, sir, so that I could stop on the trail and hide it, for after I get away from them devils, I wants ter go straight home, and not have to come by the fort."

"All right, I will," and the man left the room, while the major called out:

"Now, Sir Unknown, come in."

From an adjoining room, where he had been in hiding, now walked the Masked Driver.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

A HALT BY THE TRAILSIDE.

"WELL, Sir Unknown, congratulate me, for, as you overheard, I will soon have my child with me," said the major.

"I do congratulate you, major, for she will be with you sooner than you anticipate."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that Mr. Toby Thorn is an arrant fraud."

"What?"

"It is true, sir."

"Do you dash all my hopes thus to the ground?"

"Oh, no, sir, but Toby Thorn is a fraud, as I will prove to you in time."

"But my daughter's letter, for it surely is her writing?"

"She wrote it, Major Dean, there is no doubt of that; but that man, instead of being a captive, is one of the band."

"Ah!"

"That is it, sir."

"But he tells a very straight story."

"True, sir, and he had to, when he was risking his life by coming here."

"But the story was all cut and dried, the letter gotten from your daughter, and all arranged for a dead certainty of getting that ransom, knowing that you were powerless to do otherwise than pay it."

"I see."

"Now, give this man a check for his money, and make it payable at your Eastern bank, and he will be satisfied, and make it for any sum you may wish, for I promise you it will never be presented."

"You have some reason for saying this?"

"I have, sir, and when I next return all will be as clear as noonday, I trust, as well as, let me tell you, sir, that you will, I feel certain, be able to welcome your daughter, the sergeant's wife and the young soldier,

without having to pay good money to outlaws, and moreover, have your revenge be sides."

"My dear friend, I have perfect confidence in you, and I will abide by what you say."

"Then give the check to Mr. Toby Thorn, arrange all matters with him about the ransom, that an officer is to go alone to Death's Canyon with the gold, that I am to bring your daughter and the others on here, only make no move to get the ransom-money, and do not send an officer with it."

"You surprise me!"

"There is no need of paying gold, sir, for that for which lead and steel will do as well," was the very significant reply of the Masked Driver.

"Well, all is in your hands, to manage it in your own way."

"Thank you, sir, and I believe I can promise you, with no fear of disappointment, that upon my next run to Fort Famine, I will bring your daughter with me, and her fellow captives, also."

"Heaven grant it, my friend," and the voice of the brave man quivered with emotion.

The next morning when the coach left Fort Famine, Toby Thorn was a passenger, riding on the box with the Masked Driver, and this time he was not in irons.

As they went along Toby Thorn told the driver just what had occurred, and all about his mission, as the major had asked him to do, but to keep it a dead secret."

"Oh, yes, I'll never tell, not I, for I want the honor of taking the prisoners in to the fort myself," said the Masked Driver.

"And he gave me a check for a clean five thousand, all for myself, and now I can go East and see my people, for what I lost by the Mysterious Murderers robbing me was not half that much," said the messenger, in an elated manner.

"You are in great luck, Mr. Thorn."

"Well now, I am, hain't I?"

"You surely are."

"I only wish it was over with, for I hates to go back to them fiends."

"I should think so, and they may search you, so what are you going to do with your check?"

"I'll hide it some way."

"I hope you can; but be sure and not take it with you."

"I will."

"Does yer halt here?"

"Yes, to water my horses, and for a short rest—see! hands up! I mean death to you if you do not obey!" and the Masked Driver, having halted his team, suddenly covered the man with his revolver as he sat by his side upon the box.

"Say, pard, what does this mean, fer I—"

"Hold out your hands—quick!"

The man obeyed, now as white as a sheet, and he was at once manacled, then bound to the seat, after which a gag was forced into his mouth.

Then from the Masked Driver came a signal, three sharp whistles, and, a moment after, men were seen coming from among the rocks upon a ridge.

"Now I want that check—ah! here it is! I will return it to the major myself."

"Ho, Bill, I have a prisoner here, and now we will go on as soon as you get inside the coach."

Those who came down the ridge were Buffalo Bill and five scouts. They hastily clambered into the coach, the prisoner on the box with the Masked Driver now trembling violently, for he felt that he was in the power of very dangerous foes.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

A COMPLETE SURPRISE.

"Now, Pard Toby, if you cannot fight, or talk, you can hear, and let me tell you, that when I drive up to Relay Number Four, if you make any sign to give an alarm, it will be your last act on earth."

"I have arranged your beard over that gag so that it will not readily be seen, and you can hide the manacles upon your hands by holding my whip for me."

"Then we will have a little talk about terms, to see if we can strike a bargain for your future usefulness."

"You understand?"

The man nodded, and, fifteen minutes after, the driver blew his stage horn, and when he dashed up to the cabin, Murdock and his two companions were there to receive him, the fresh horses all ready.

"Murdock, I wish a word with you," and the Masked Driver got down leisurely from the box and, turning suddenly, called out, as he thrust a revolver into the man's face:

"Hands up, for you are my prisoner!"

At the same instant the two doors of the coach flew open and out leaped Buffalo Bill and his scouts, revolvers in hand.

Giant George, one of the stock-tenders, drew his revolver and fired at Cody, but his aim or the sudden alarm and excitement, was not as true as his usual record, while Buffalo Bill's bullet pierced the big ruffian's breast.

Sykes, the other stock-tender, started to run, but in an instant was caught by the scouts, and the two prisoners and the body of Giant George were quickly bound, gagged and placed in the coach.

The man Thorn was lifted from the box and placed inside also, while two of the scouts remained at the relay to look after the stage horses, until they should be relieved by some of the company's men.

Buffalo Bill and his other men now got into the coach and the Masked Driver went on for the next relay, passing through Death's Canyon without a halt.

As they neared the station loud rung the stage-horn, and, dashing up to the door, the Masked Driver called out:

"Hoop-la, Foxey! Here I am again, and I've got a message for you too."

With this he dismounted while the stable men were looking to the changing of the teams.

As he approached Fox, he turned him one side, with his back to the coach, as though he had something of a secret nature to tell him, when at once the coach doors opened and out stepped Buffalo Bill and his men.

"Hands up all around!" cried the Masked Driver, and to the consternation of Foxey and his men they were all covered with the deadly little guns.

As at Number Four one showed fight—Bloden, but he was promptly shot by Buffalo Bill, while Knuckles and Bradley attempted to run and the former fell, shot by one of the scouts, while the latter was quickly captured.

As for Foxey he stood like a man who was dazed. His bronzed face now had the pallor of death upon it, and he made no move to resist, but muttered, after a moment:

"What does it mean, pard?"

"It means that you are the chief of the Mysterious Murderers, Foxey, and that we have run you to earth, that is all. Your other two stations will soon be in our power also."

"It's false!" roared Foxey.

But he was quickly bound securely.

The Masked Driver, turning to Buffalo Bill, then said:

"Now Cody, we will have a talk with Toby Thorn."

The chief of the scouts brought Toby Thorn out of the coach and led him apart from the others.

"Thorn, I happen to know that you have been the man who has been kept by Foxey at the retreat, and therefore you have not been with the band when they have murdered and robbed the coaches."

"It is lucky for you that such is the case, for now you can save your life by leading us at once to the place where Miss Dean and the other prisoners are."

"I'll do it, pard, I'll do it!" was the eager response.

"First tell me if there are any other guards there?"

"One, Sampson, who is a perfect giant, pard. It is he who watches with me."

"All right; we'll take care of Sampson, as his namesake of old did the Philistines," was Buffalo Bill's remark, and leaving the other scouts on guard he ordered Toby Thorn to lead to the secret retreat.

To the surprise of the Masked Driver and Buffalo Bill he entered the cabin, caught hold of one end of two bunks that seemed fast to the wall, and pulling them out, for the other end was hung on hinges, revealed the entrance to a cavern.

A lantern was there, and lighting it, the two pards bade their prisoner move on.

It was a walk of fully two hundred yards, ascending as they went, and at last the guide whispered:

"We are near the end of the cavern, so I better call Sampson in here, pretending I want him to help me, for he's a devil and will never surrender."

"All right."

Then Toby Thorn called out:

"Ho, Sampson, come and help me with a prisoner I has here, and be in a hurry, too."

"I is coming," cried a deep voice; and a moment later there appeared in the light from the other end of the cavern, a form over six feet in height, and very powerful in build.

"Hands up, Sampson, or you die!" cried the Masked Driver.

A yell of fury broke from the man, and quick as a flash he fired.

The victim was not the two rescuers, but Toby Thorn, who fell dead in his tracks, just as a shot from the Masked Driver brought down the huge outlaw.

Before he could rise, Buffalo Bill and the Masked Driver threw themselves upon him, and he was quickly manacled, for he was not seriously hurt, it was soon discovered.

CHAPTER LXXV.

THE RESCUE.

WHEN the two pards entered the space into which the cavern led them, after having firmly secured the prisoner Sampson, and discovered that Thorn was dead, they found themselves in a perfect basin in the summit of the mountains.

It appeared to be the crater of some long-ago extinct volcano, for, an acre in size, its walls rose smooth and perfectly perpendicular to a height of over a hundred feet, the brink all around being fringed with trees.

And in this crater, or basin, there was a spring bubbling out of the wall of rock and flowing away into a crevice on the other side, a score of trees bordering the tiny stream, and a long cabin close in under the overhanging cliffs.

In part of that cabin stood three persons, all of them females.

One of them was Hortense Dean, another the sergeant's wife, and the third was also a young girl, with short, curling hair and graceful form.

They looked pale and anxious, but at sight of the chief of scouts and the Masked Driver, the sergeant's wife called out lustily:

"Miss Hortense! Miss Florence! we are saved! we are saved! for, glory be to Heaven, there is Buffalo Bill."

"And glad I am to see you, Mrs. Gale, I assure you, and also to tell you that you are saved, or rather rescued, for we have your captors prisoners," and Buffalo Bill's hand was nearly wrung off by the happy woman, who cried:

"Oh, dear, Buffalo Bill, this is Miss Hortense Dean, the daughter of the major, and this lady is her friend, Miss Florence Germaine—sure now, and I will tell it, for the outlaws knew it—yes, Buffalo Bill, this young lady came with Miss Hortense on a visit, and to serve as a protection for both of them, she dressed up in soldier clothes and came along that way; but when the robbers captured them she was only too glad to play the girl again."

"There, I've told on you now, Miss Florence, so I have."

Buffalo Bill bowed low to the young ladies, and said:

"Now I must present to you my Unknown Pard, the Masked Driver of Death's Canyon, for, by no other name is he known to any one save myself just now."

"It is to the Masked Driver that you owe your rescue, for his was the plot that won success."

"Now, let me say, we will escort you to the coach, and you will be driven to Fort Rest, where the testimony of all three of you is needed against these men; but on the next run of the coach the Masked Driver will take you to Fort Famine."

The two young girls and the sergeant's wife warmly grasped the hands of the rescuers, and while Hortense Dean carried the lantern back through the cavern, the scout and the Masked Driver brought the baggage.

which the outlaws had allowed them to have, after taking all there was of value in it.

The maidens shuddered as they passed the body of the dead Toby, and saw the wounded Sampson, but Buffalo Bill told them that the scouts would soon come after the dead man and the wounded one.

Arriving at the cabin they were greeted with a triumphant yell by the three scouts, who were ordered into the cave to bring Sampson and his dead companion.

As the prisoners and the dead were to occupy the inside of the stage, place was made on the top for Hortense Dean, her friend and Mrs. Gale, and they said they much preferred to ride there.

Then, with his strange load the Masked Driver started upon his way, Buffalo Bill calling out to him:

"I will meet you there on time, pard."

"All right, Bill," was the answer, and the Masked Driver, in spite of the load he carried, now drove more rapidly along than ever before.

And such a load, for in the baggage-rack behind were the bodies of Toby Thorn and the two outlaws slain at the stations, and inside the coach was Foxey, the wounded man Sampson and the other four outlaws, all securely ironed, for the Masked Driver was the sole guard now, while on top were the two young girls and Mrs. Gale—a strange cargo, indeed, and the driver a masked man and unknown.

Loud and ringing was the stage-horn as the coach neared the fort, and it was soon reported that some ladies from Fort Famine had dared to come through under the protection of the Masked Driver.

But when the coach drew rein at the station there was indeed a sensation, and when it became known that the Masked Driver had brought in the rescued captives, and had as prisoners the Mysterious Murderers, the excitement was unbounded.

With the three captives under his charge, the Masked Driver went to headquarters, and the welcome they got from Colonel Miles, his officers and their wives, can better be imagined than described.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

WIPED OUT.

BRIGHT and early the next morning the coach started for Trail End City, the Masked Driver again on the box.

Though he had held a long conversation with Colonel Miles he did not yet unmask, and had gone to his cabin early and remained alone, as was his custom.

Those who saw him start off in the morning knew that he had other work to accomplish, and felt that they would soon hear what it was, as the coach was to come back the following day, to keep up the old schedule, so many days having been lost by delays that it would then be all right, and the runs would be on original days.

When out some distance from Fort Rest the Driver halted and gave a signal.

It was answered by the appearance of Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Moore.

After a few words together the two latter got into the coach, which was tightly closed, and the Masked Driver dashed on to Relay Number Two.

The three stock-tenders came out, and making an excuse he got down from his box and a moment after, the three surprised outlaws were looking into the muzzles of the revolvers of the trio who had so suddenly demanded their surrender.

Rendered desperate by the discovery of their crimes the three men resisted, and there were several shots rung out.

"I was forced to kill my man," said Lieutenant Moore coolly, while the Masked Driver remarked:

"And but for the fact that this man's bullet flattened against my watch he would have killed me, for I was caught for once off my guard."*

As he spoke he took from his vest pocket his watch in which the bullet had buried itself.

"A whack over the head with my revolver

*The Masked Driver still keeps as a precious souvenir, the watch, worn in the upper vest pocket on his left side, over his heart, and which still has the bullet imbedded in it.—THE AUTHOR.

took the fight out of my man," Buffalo Bill said.

"Now to go on to Station Number One," said the Masked Driver, and leaving the man killed by Lieutenant Moore in the cabin, and taking their two prisoners, the victors started on their way.

As they neared the relay the Masked Driver called down to Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Moore who were in the coach:

"Buckskin Charlie has done the work, for he is there with his scouts."

As the coach halted there was Buckskin Charlie, and near him were three soldiers, with one prisoner in their keeping, while upon the ground lay a dead soldier and two stock-tenders.

"They showed fight when I called upon them to surrender, sir, and so we had to have it out, for they killed Private Bowles as you see, sir," said Buckskin Charlie addressing Lieutenant Moore, who answered:

"The regret is that poor Bowles went under, and that the two you killed, Buckskin Charlie, escaped the gallows."

"That ends it, pard, for not one of the Mysterious Murderers has escaped us," said Buffalo Bill, and he added, still addressing the Masked Driver:

"Buckskin Charlie and one of the soldiers will go on back to Relay Number Two, while the lieutenant and his men and I will wait your return here, so bring out two tenders for each station, and a driver, you know."

"Yes, don't forget the driver," called out Lieutenant Moore as the coach rolled away.

There was the usual crowd to greet the coach upon its run into Trail End City, but little they suspected the happenings to the Masked Driver in the last two days.

Taking Pete Porter into his private office the Masked Driver told him all that had occurred, that Foxey, who had selected the stock-tenders for the four relay stations, and was their captain, was an outlaw himself and had picked out outlaws for the places.

He had then organized his band of cut-throats, and by riding from station to station, and never suspected, always being on foot to leave no trail, and cutting across country from Stations Numbers One and Two, he had had things all his own way, and so carried on his devilish work unchecked.

Pete Porter was astounded, and told the Masked Driver that he would send with him the next morning eight good men and true as stock-tenders, and a driver to relieve him of the Fatal Coach, for the Unknown had said:

"After reaching Fort Famine on this run, Pete, I shall drive no more."

The next morning the crowd at Trail End City were surprised to see another driver on the box with the Masked Driver, and eight men go as inside passengers.

Arriving at Number One two men were left there, and Lieutenant Moore, Buffalo Bill and the two soldiers were taken aboard, with the dead bodies in the rear rack and the prisoners on top.

At Number Two a couple more of the stock-tenders were left; but here were the horses of the soldiers and scouts, and as Buckskin Charlie and the three troopers rode horseback, the coach was not overcrowded, but again created a stir when it rolled into Fort Rest with its load.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

THE MASKED DRIVER UNMASKS.

THE testimony of the captives of the Mysterious Murderers had been taken by Colonel Miles while the coach was gone to Trail End City, so that they were ready and willing to start for Fort Famine, where Hortense Dean would meet her father and Mrs. Gale her husband.

They took passage on the coach the next morning, the two young ladies riding with the Masked Driver, while Mrs. Gale, as there were no dead bodies and prisoners on board, said she preferred to ride inside, for it made her head swim to go on top.

In the coach with her were the four stock-tenders to be dropped at the two stations, and the driver who had come along to relieve the unknown man when they reached Fort Famine.

Reaching the stations, the men were dropped there, while the scouts in charge were to be picked up on the run back.

When nearing the fort, Hortense Dean took out of her sachel a silver cornet, and placing it to her lips, she made the rocks ring with the ringing notes, and it brought all out to welcome the coach.

A few moments more she was in her father's arms, the sergeant's wife was happy, and Florence Germaine said to the Masked Driver:

"If I only had a lover to welcome me, the cup of bliss would be full to the brim."

Taking her by the hand, the Masked Driver said:

"Major Dean, your daughter presented Miss Germaine as her friend, but she is more, for this is the young soldier whom we were all so worried about, fearing that he had been put to death."

"Yes, major, I own up, I was the soldier boy."

When the greetings were over, the major said:

"Now, my masked friend, I suppose we are to know who it is that I owe my happiness to, for you are the one who has rescued from the outlaws my child and her fellow-captives."

"I was but one of thirteen, sir, for Buffalo Bill deserves most credit; Lieutenant Moore and his men, and Buckskin Charlie and the other scouts are entitled to the credit of the rescue."

"It was Buffalo Bill who played highwayman, and held up Foxey, the outlaw leader, getting from him the watch of one of the drivers slain, the ring of another, the wallet of a third and papers which alone would hang him, and he, with his scouts, and Lieutenant Moore with his soldiers, have been in secret camps along the trail, have suffered hardships, have scouted day and night and ferreted out this mystery of Death's Canyon, for their testimony will be given to-day to Colonel Miles, and I have been but a means to an end in the good work, which will only be complete when those fiends have been hanged."

"You are too modest, my friend, about your own services."

"No, major, I am simply just."

"But we are to know you now, certainly."

"No, sir, not yet," and the strange man walked away.

The next morning he took his place on the box, but not as driver, for the man from Trail End City took the reins.

Farewells were said, and as the coach rolled off on its way Hortense Dean said:

"What a strange man; but we will know him yet, will we not, Florence?"

"Indeed we will," was the answer.

The scouts were picked up at the two stations, and the coach entered the stockade at Fort Rest an hour late, for the plunder of the outlaws' den had been taken along.

Arriving at the fort the Masked Driver was met by Buffalo Bill and Lieutenant Moore, and taken to the latter's quarters, where the three had dinner together.

Then they walked over to headquarters and were admitted to an audience with Colonel Miles, who stepped forward and extending his hand, said:

"Now, sir, I believe I am to have the pleasure of knowing you as you are?"

"Yes, Colonel Miles, and pardon me for keeping the secret so long from you," and the Masked Driver removed his mask, and at once came the exclamation from Colonel Miles:

"What! Surgeon Frank Powell of the army?"

"You are the Masked Driver then?"

"I might have known it, from Buffalo Bill being in the secret, for you have been called his shadow, and he yours."

"Let me explain, Colonel Miles, that Buffalo Bill wrote to me up at Fort McPherson, where I am nominally under arrest, telling me of this mystery of the Overland and asking my aid."

"I at once came here to find that Major Dean's daughter was a prisoner, and you may remember that in a personal encounter, forced upon me a short while ago, I killed the major's best friend, and he would not accept my version of the affair."

"Being under arrest, awaiting court-mar-

tial for the act, I had to do what I did secretly, so I got leave from Colonel Royal and came here.

"Among my collection of curios and relics I happen to have an old armor of woven steel, the body doubly woven, and with skull-cap, apron for the neck and all.

"This I knew to be bullet proof, for I had tested it, so I brought it along determined to take my chances in it of running the gantlet of Death's Canyon.

"I made it still more secure by a rawhide armor of Indian make which I put over it, and the mask hid the steel over my face, the gantlet gloves my mailed hands, so that only a chance shot in the eye holes could kill, or hurt me.

"Knowing this Cody consented to my driving the coach, and by stopping, after leaving the forts, and donning my armor, and by closing the coach, I was all right, with a great deal of bluster talk, for the outlaws were sure I had some trap to spring upon them, and really believed the coach was full of scouts.

"Lieutenant Moore and Buckskin Charlie were let into the secret, and with the soldiers and scouts constantly watching the trails we were able to keep the outlaws still, until the two fired upon me that day in the canyon, and, but for my armor, would have killed me.

"The shots were fired by two of the men who stood guard at the retreat.

"Suspecting Foxey, Buffalo Bill held him up at the suggestion of Lieutenant Moore and myself, and you know the testimony of his guilt secured thereby.

"Now, Colonel Miles, I could not tell you my secret, knowing you would consider it your duty to order me at once back to McPherson, where I must go in a few days to stand my court-martial.

"As I have lived so much among the Indians, you know it was an easy thing for me to impersonate Many Hair.

"Such, sir, is my explanation."

To say that Colonel Miles could refuse to accept it would be to wrong that gallant officer, for he did accept it; and more, he told the Surgeon Scout* that he should send testimony in his favor to the court-martial, which he hoped would be of great service to him, and that the gallant services he had rendered should be at once reported to the commanding general.

That night the colonel sent a courier to Fort Famine, with a letter to Major Dean, giving him the story of Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout, as he had heard it.

CONCLUSION.

ONE hour after the arrival of the courier from Fort Rest, with the letter of Colonel Miles, an ambulance drove away from Fort Famine.

In the ambulance, which was driven by Sergeant Gale, were Major Dean, Hortense, and Florence Germaine.

Stopping at the stage relay stations, fresh horses were taken in place of the tired ones, for the major ordered the sergeant to drive rapidly, so that Fort Rest came in sight soon after noon.

Up to headquarters drove the ambulance, and the major and the young ladies sprung out, just as Colonel Miles was bidding a farewell to Surgeon Frank Powell, who was about to start upon his return to Fort McPherson.

The coming of the party was a surprise to the Surgeon Scout, if not to Colonel Miles, but he could not escape, as Major Dean stepped quickly up to him and said:

"My dear Powell, let me ask you to forgive my unkind words when I was told that my best friend, Harrow, had fallen by your hand.

"I have since learned the truth of the affair, and there is a letter at McPherson from me awaiting you, telling you that now I know Harrow was wrong—that you could only have acted as you did.

"If you refuse my apology, here is one who will plead for me; yes, and still another," and he turned to Hortense and Florence, the former remarking:

* Doctor Frank Powell, of La Crosse, Wis., late surgeon in the army, and known on the plains as White Beaver, Fancy Frank, Surgeon Scout and Mighty Medicine-man.

THE AUTHOR.

"Yes, gladly will I plead."

"My dear major, no pleading is necessary for me to accept your hand again in friendship.

"You wronged me, and your letter to me I know makes full amends.

"Now let the dead past bury its dead and we be the friends again we were in the by-gone," was the manly utterance of the handsome and dashing Surgeon Scout.

After a few words more the Surgeon Scout bade farewell to all and started upon his way back to Fort McPherson, Buffalo Bill having leave from Colonel Miles to accompany him, and he was also made the bearer of dispatches to the general commanding, giving a full report of the capture of the outlaw band known as the Mysterious Murderers of Death's Canyon.

Arriving at Fort McPherson the Surgeon Scout found that instead of a court-martial he had only an investigation into his affair with Ferd Harrow, for eye-witnesses had testified that, had not Doctor Powell fired when he did, he would surely have been killed, for the other was the aggressor; and more, he had threatened to kill the surgeon for taking the part of a cowboy whom he, Harrow, was unmercifully beating.

Back to Fort Rest went Buffalo Bill, with the glad tidings of his friend's release from arrest, and how both Frank Powell and himself had been feted for their part in solving the mystery of Death's Canyon.

THE END.

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BY WM. G. PATTEN.

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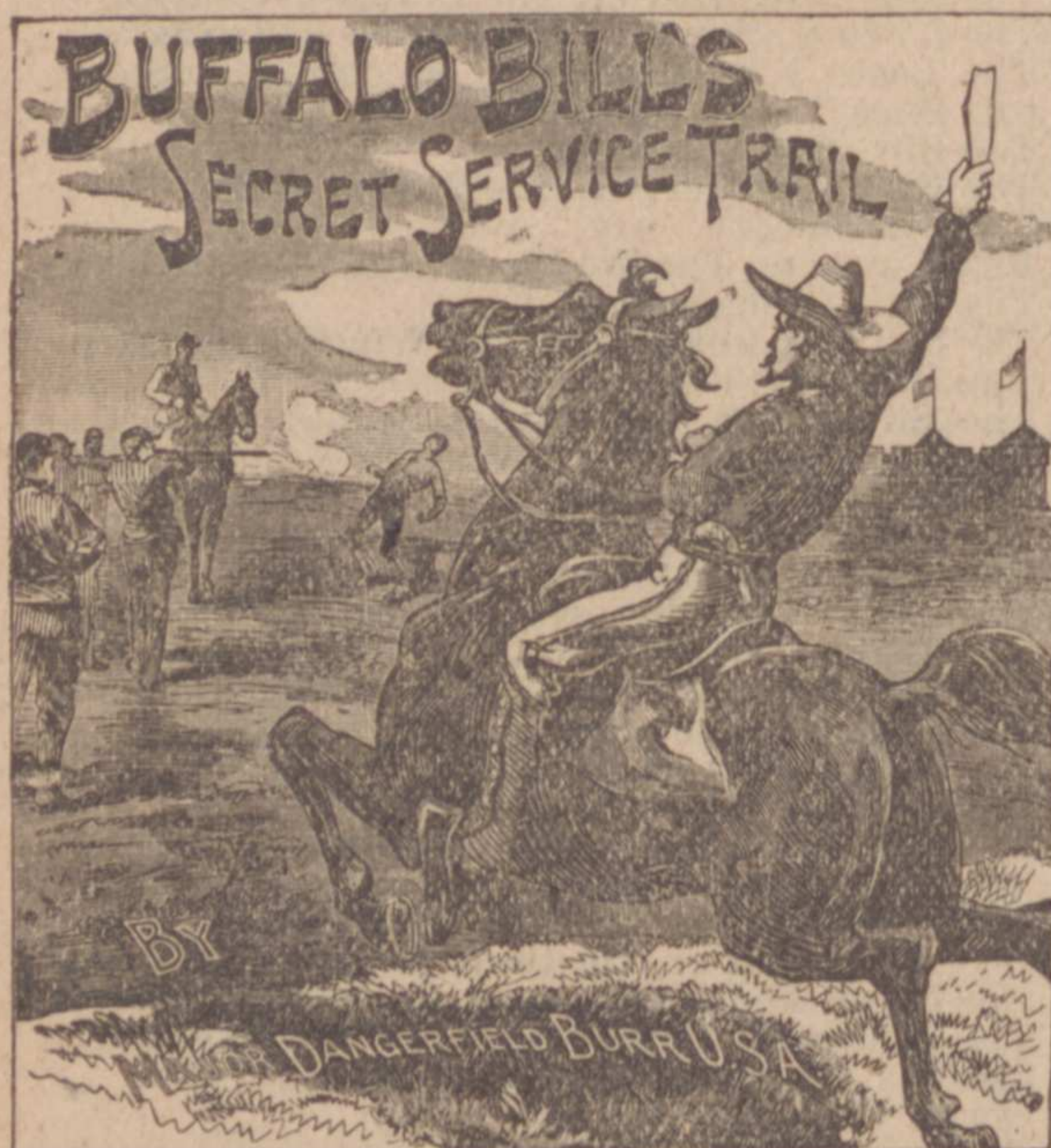
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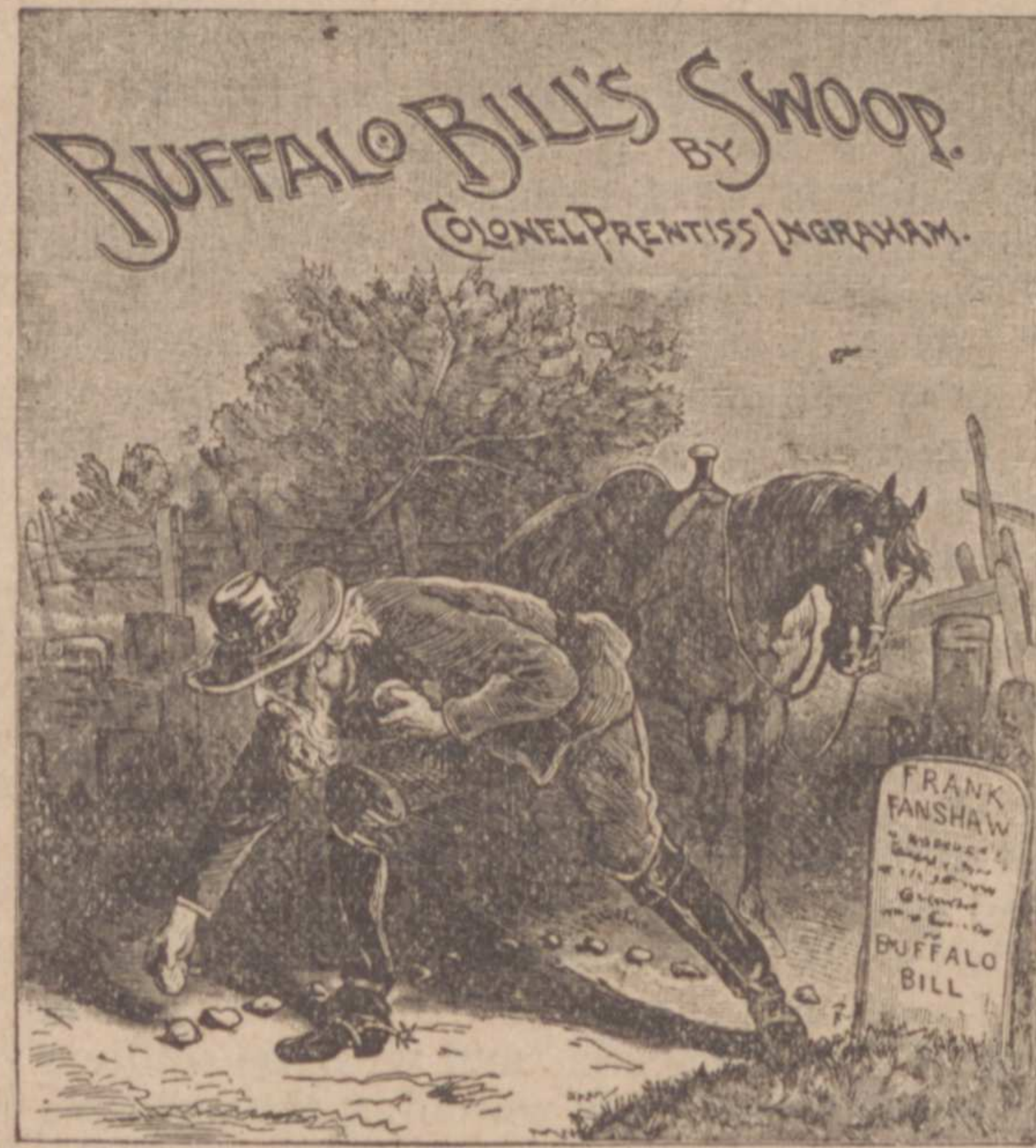
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